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J O H N

A LOVE STORY

BY

MRS OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,' ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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## CHAPTER XV.

THERE is nothing so hard in human experience as to fit in the exceptional moments of life into their place, and bring them into a certain harmony with that which surrounds them ; and in youth it is doubly hard to understand how it is that the exceptional can come only in moments. When the superlative either of misery or happiness arrives, there is nothing so difficult to an imaginative mind as to descend from that altitude and allow that the commonplace must return, and the ordinary resume its sway. And perhaps, more than any other crisis, the crisis of youthful passion and romance is the one which it is most diffi-

cult to come down from. It has wound up the young soul to an exaltation which has scarcely any parallel in life ; even to the least visionary, the event which has happened—the union which has taken place between one heart and another—the sentiment which has concentrated all beauty and loveliness and desirableness in one being, and made that being his—is something too supreme and dazzling to fall suddenly into the light of common day. John Mitford was not matter of fact, and the situation to him was doubly exciting. It was attended, besides, by the disruption of his entire life ; and though he would readily have acknowledged that the rest of his existence could not be passed in those exquisite pangs and delights—that mixture of absolute rapture in being with her, and visionary despair at her absence—which had made up the story of his brief courtship ; yet there was in him a strong unexpressed sense that the theory of life altogether must henceforward be framed on a higher level—that a finer ideal was before him, higher harmonies, a more perfect state of being ; instead of all which dreams,

when he came to himself he was seated on a high stool, before a desk, under the dusty window of Mr Crediton's bank, with the sound of the swinging door, and the voices of the public, and the crackle of notes, and the jingle of coin in his ears, and a tedious trade to learn, in which there seemed to him no possible satisfaction of any kind ! When John had said—in that golden age which already seemed centuries past—that a clergyman's was the only work worth doing, he had meant, that it was the only work for mankind in which a man could have any confidence. He had said so, while in the same breath he had expressed his want of absolute belief ; and the one sentiment had not affected the other. But here he found himself in a sphere where it did not matter to any one what he believed—where he was utterly out of the way of influencing other people's thoughts, and had none of that work within reach which seems almost indispensable to men of his training—work which should affect his fellow-men. So long as he knew that two and two make four, that seemed to be all the knowledge that was required of him.

With a sense of surprise which almost stupefied him, he found that all the careful education of his life was as nought to him in his new sphere. If it did not harm him—which sometimes he thought it did—at least it was totally useless. The multiplication table was of more use than Homer or Virgil; and John's mind was the mind of a scholar, not of an active thinker, much less doer. He was the kind of man that dwells and lingers upon the cadence of a line or the turn of a sentence—a man not always very sure which were the most real—the men and women in his books, or those he pushed against in the public ways. “We are such stuff as dreams are made of.” Fancy a man with such words in his mouth finding himself all at once a dream among dreams, gazing vaguely over a counter at the public, feeling himself utterly incapable of any point of encounter with that public such as his education and previous training suggested, except in the way of counting out money to them, or adding up the sums against them. What a wonderful, wonderful change it was! And then to come down to this from that



exaltation of love's dream—to jump into this, shivering as into an ice-cold bath, out of all the excitement of youthful plans and fancies, visions of the nobler existence, ecstasy of first betrothal! The shock was so immense that it took away his breath. He sat all silent, chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy for days together, and then got his hat and walked back to the shabby little rooms he had taken on the outskirts of Camelford, stupefied, and not knowing what he was about. What was he to do when he got there? He ate his badly-cooked and painfully-homely meal, and then he would sit and stare at his two candles as he stared at the public in the bank. He did not feel capable of reading—what was the good of reading? Nothing that he had within his reach could be of any use to him in his new career, and his mind was not in a fit condition for resuming any studies or seeking out any occupation for itself. When Kate made inquiries into his life on the Sunday evenings, he found it very difficult to answer her. What could he say? There was nothing in it which was worth describing, or which it would have

given her, he thought, anything but pain to know.

“But tell me, have you nice rooms—is there a nice woman to look after you?” Kate would say. “If you don’t answer me I shall have to go and see them some day when you are at the bank. I will say you are my—cousin, or something. Or perhaps if I were to tell the truth,” she added, softly, with her favourite trick, almost leaning her head against his arm, “it would interest her, and she would take more pains.”

“And what would you say if you said the truth?” said foolish John. Poor fellow! this was all he had for his sacrifice, and naturally he longed for his hire, such as it was.

“I should say, of course, that you were a nearer one still, and a dearer one,” said Kate, with a soft little laugh; “what else? but oh, John, is it not very different? That dear Fanshawe Regis, and your mother, and everything you have been used to. Is it not very, very different?” she cried, expecting that he would tell her how much more blessed were

his poor lodgings and close work when brightened by the hope of her.

“Yes, it is very different,” he said, in a dreamy, dreary tone. The summer was stealing on; it was August by this time, and the days were shortening. And it was almost dark, as dark as a summer night can be, when they strayed about the garden in the High Street, which was so different from the Rectory garden. There were few flowers, but at the farther end some great lime-trees, old and vast, which made the gravel-path look like a woodland road for twenty paces or so. She could not see his face in the dark, but there was in his voice nothing of that inflection which promised a flattering end to the sentence. Kate was a little chilled, she did not know why.

“But you don’t—grudge it?” she said, softly. “Oh, John, there is something in your voice—you are not sorry you have done so much?—for nothing but *me*?”

“Sorry!” he said, stooping over her—  
“sorry to be called into life when I did not know I was living! But, Kate, if it were not for

*this*, that is my reward for everything, I will not deny that there is a great difference. I should have been working upon men the other way; and one gets contemptuous of money. Never mind, I care for nothing while I have you."

"I never knew any one that was contemptuous of money," said Kate, gravely; "people here say money can do everything. That is why I want you to be rich."

"Dear," he said, holding her close to him, "you don't understand, and neither did I. I don't think I shall ever be rich. How should I, a clerk in a bank? Your father does not show me any favour, and it is not to be expected he should. Who am I, that I should try to steal his child from him? Since I have been here, Kate, there are a great many things that I begin to understand——"

"What?" she said, as he paused; raising in the soft summer dark her face to his.

"Well, for one thing, what a gulf there is between you and me!" he said; "and how natural it was that your father should be vexed. And then, Kate—don't let it grieve

you, darling—how very very unlikely it is that I shall ever be the rich man you want me to be. I thought when we spoke of it once that anything you told me to do would be easy; and so it would, if it was definite—anything to bear—if it was labouring night and day, suffering tortures for you——”

Here Kate interrupted him with a little sob of excitement, holding his arm clasped in both her hands: “Oh, John, do I want you to suffer?” she cried. “You should have everything that was best in the world if it was me——”

“But I don’t know how to grow rich—I don’t think I shall ever know,” said John, with a sigh. Up to this moment he had restrained himself and had given no vent to his feelings, but when the ice was once broken they all burst forth. The two went on together up and down under the big lime-trees, she gazing up at him, he bending down to her, as they had done in the old garden at Fanshawe when he confided his difficulties to her. He had thrust off violently that series of difficulties, abandoning the conflict, but only to let a new set of difficulties seize upon him in still

greater strength than the former. And the whole was complicated by a sense that it was somehow her doing, and that a complaint of them was next to a reproach of her. But still it was not in nature, his mouth being thus opened, that John could refrain.

“I seem to be always complaining,” he said — “one time of circumstances, another time of myself; for it is of myself this time. Many a fellow would be overjoyed, no doubt, to find himself in the way of making his own fortune, but you can’t think how little good I am. I suppose I never was very bright. If you will believe me, Kate, not only shall I never make any fortune where your father has placed me, but I am so stupid that I cannot see how a man may rise out of such a position, nor how a fortune is to be made.”

“But people do it,” said Kate, eagerly; “one hears of them every day. Of course I don’t know how. It is energy or something — making up their minds to it; and of course though papa may look cross he must be favourable to you. John, you *know* he must. If I thought he was not, I should make him—

I don't know what I should not make him do——”

“You must not make him do anything,” said John. “You may be sure I don't mean to give in—I shall try my best, and perhaps there may be more in me than I think. I suppose it is seeing you, and being so far apart from you, that is the worst. Except to-night—if the Sundays came, say three times in a week——”

“I don't think I should like that,” said Kate; “but seriously, you know, don't you like to see me?—are you—jealous?” she asked, with a little laugh. The talk had been too grave for her, and she was glad to draw it down to a lower sphere.

“If I were,” he said, with a sudden glow of passion, “I should go away. I have never faced that idea yet; but if I were—jealous, as you say——”

“What?” she cried, with the curiosity of her kind, clinging to him in the fondest proximity, yet half pleased to play with her keen little dagger in his heart.

“That would be the end,” he said, with a

long-drawn breath. And a thrill of excitement came over Kate which was more pleasurable than otherwise. Had she really stirred him up to the height of a *grande passion*? It was not that she meant to be cruel to John. But such an opportunity does not come in everybody's way. She could not help wondering suddenly how he would feel under the trial, and how his sufferings would show themselves. As for his going away, she did not put much faith in that. He would be very unhappy, and there would be a certain satisfaction in the sight of his torments. Kate did not say this in words, nor was she conscious of meaning it; but in the mere levity of her power the thought flashed through her mind. For, to be sure, it would only be for a moment that she would let him suffer. When she had enjoyed that evidence of her own supremacy, then she would overwhelm him with kindness, prove to him how foolish he was ever to doubt her, give herself to him without waiting for anybody's leave. But in the mean time that strange curiosity to see how far her power went which is at the bottom of so much cruelty ran through



her mind. It all went and came in the twinkling of an eye, passing like the lightning, and when she answered him, poor John had no idea what a sudden gleam of suggestion had come over her, or how far her imagination had gone in the time.

“But there is not going to be an end,” she said, in her soft, coaxing voice. “And you will put up with it, and with papa, and with a great many things we don’t like—won’t you? for the sake of a poor little girl who is not worth it. Oh, John! you know you committed yourself to all that when you saved my life.”

John was nothing loath to commit himself now to anything she asked of him; and as they strayed on under the dark rustling lime-trees, with nobody within sight or sound, and the darkness enclosing them, utter content came over the young man’s mind. After all, was not this hour cheaply purchased by all the tedium and all the disgusts of common life? And even the common life looked more endurable in this sweet gloom which was full of Kate’s soft breathing, and the soft

rustle of her dress, and sense of her presence. She was so close to him, leaning on his arm, and yet he could see nothing but an outline of her by his side. It was thus she had been by him on the night which decided his fate—a shadow-woman, tender, clinging, almost invisible. “Kate, Kate,” he said, out of his full heart, “I wonder if you are a little witch leading me astray?—for it is always in the dark when I can’t see you that you are good to me. When we go in you will be kind and sweet, but you will be Miss Credition. Are we shadows, you and I? or are you Undine or Lorelei drawing me to my fate?”

“You foolish fellow,” said Kate; “how could I be Undine and not a drop of water nearer than Fanshawe Regis? Don’t you see that when we go in papa is there? You would not like me to write up in big letters—“I have gone over to the enemy—I don’t belong to you any longer.” You know, John, it would be true. I am not *his* now, poor papa, and he is so fond of me; but you would not like me to put that on a flag and have it

carried before me ; you would not be so cruel to papa ?”

“I am a poor mortal,” said John, “I almost think I could be cruel. If you are not his, are you mine ? Say so, you little Queen of Shadows, and I will try to remember it and comfort my heart.”

“Whose else should I be ?” whispered Kate. And the lover’s satisfaction attained for a moment to that point of perfection which lasts but for a moment. His heart seemed to stop beating in that ineffable fulness of content. He took her into his arms in the soft summer darkness—two shadows in a world of shadow. Everything around them, everything before them, was dim with mist. Nothing could be more uncertain than their prospects, a fact which John, at least, had begun to realise fully. The whole scene was an illustration of the words which were so often in his heart. Uncertain gusts of balmy wind, now from one quarter, now from another, agitated the trees overhead. The faint twilight of the skies confused all outlines—the darkness under the trees obliterated every

living thing—little mysterious thrills of movement, of the leaves, of the air, of invisible insects or roosted birds, were about them. “We are such stuff as dreams are made of.” But amid these shadows for one moment John caught a passing gleam of satisfaction and delight.

Mr Crediton was in the drawing-room all alone when they went in. Had he been prudent he would have gone to his library, as he usually did, and spared himself the sight; but this night a jealous curiosity had possessed him. To see his child, who had been his for all these years, come in with dazzled, dazzling eyes, and that soft blush on her cheek, and her arm, even as they entered the room, lingering within that of her lover, was very hard upon him. Confound him! he said in his heart, although he knew well that but for John he would have had no child. He noted the change which came over Kate—that change which chilled her lover, and went through him like a blast from the snow-hills—without any pleasure, almost with additional irritation. She is not even

frank, as she used to be, he said to himself. She puts on a face to cheat me, and to make me believe I am something to her still; and it might almost be said that Mr Crediton hated the young fellow who had come between him and his child.

“It is such a lovely evening, papa,” said Kate, “we could scarcely make up our minds to come in. It is not the country, of course; but still I am fond of our garden. Even at Fanshawe I don’t think there are nicer trees.”

“Of course the perfection of everything is at Fanshawe,” he said, with a sudden sharpness which changed the very atmosphere of the room all in a moment; “but I think it is imprudent to stay out so late, and it is damp, and there is no moon. I thought you required a moon for such rambles. Please let me have a cup of tea.”

“We did very well without a moon,” said Kate, trying to keep up her usual tone; but it was not easy, and she went off with a subdued step to the tea-table, and had not even the courage to call John to help her as she generally did. Oh, why didn’t papa stay in

his own room ? she said to herself. It is only one night in the week, and he should not be so selfish. But she took him his tea with her own hand, and tried all she could to soothe him. "You have got a headache, papa," she said, tenderly, putting down the cup on the table by him, and looking so anxious, so ingenuous, and innocent, that it was hard to resist her.

"I have no headache," he said ; "but I am busy. Don't take any notice—occupy yourselves as you please, without any thought of me."

This speech was produced by a sudden compunction and sense of injustice. It was a sacrifice to right, and yet he was all wrong and set on edge. He thought that Kate should have perceived that this amiability was forced and fictitious ; but either she was insensible to it, or she did not any longer care to go deeper than mere words. She kissed his forehead as if he had been in the kindest mood, and said, "Poor papa!—thanks. It is so kind of you to think of us when you are suffering." To think of them ! when she

must have known he was wishing the fellow away. And then Kate retired to the tea-table, which was behind Mr Crediton, and out of sight, and he saw her beckon to John with a half-perceptible movement. The young man obeyed, and went and sat beside her, and the sound of their voices in low-toned conversation, with little bursts of laughter and soft exclamations, was gall and wormwood to the father. It was all "that fellow," he thought: his Kate herself would never have used him so; and it was all his self-control could do to prevent him addressing some bitter words to John. But the fact was, it was Kate's doing alone—Kate, who was less happy to-night than usual, but whom his tone had galled into opposition. "No," she was whispering to John, "you are not to go away—not unless you want to be rid of *me*. Papa ought to be brought to his senses—he has no right to be so cross; and I am not going to give in to him." This was the nature of the conversation which was going on behind Mr Crediton's back. He did not hear it, and yet it gave him a furious sense of resentment,

which expressed itself at last in various little assaults.

“Have the goodness not to whisper, Kate,” he said. “You know it sets my nerves on edge. Speak out,” an address which had the effect of ending all conversation between the lovers for a minute or two. They sat silent and looked at each other till Mr Crediton spoke again. “I seem unfortunately to act upon you like a wet blanket,” he said, with an acrid tone in his voice. “Perhaps you would rather I went away.”

At this Kate’s spirit was roused. “Papa, I don’t know what I have done to displease you,” she said, coming forward. “If I am only to see him once in the week, surely I may talk to him when he comes.”

“I am not aware that I have objected to your talk,” said Mr Crediton, restraining his passion.

“Not in words,” said Kate, now fairly up in arms; “but it is not just, papa. It makes John unhappy and it makes me unhappy. He has a right to have me to himself when he comes. You cannot forget that we are



engaged. I never said a word when you insisted on once a-week, though it was a disappointment ; but you know he ought not to be cheated now."

All this time John had been moving about at the further end of the room, at once angry to the verge of violence, and discouraged to the lowest pitch. He had cleared his throat and tried to speak a dozen times already. Now he came forward, painfully restraining himself. "I ought to speak," he said ; "but I dare not trust myself to say anything. Mr Crediton cannot expect me to give up willingly the only consolation I have."

"It is time enough to speak of giving up when any one demands a sacrifice," said Mr Crediton, taking upon him suddenly that superiority of perfect calm with which a middle-aged man finds it so often possible to confute an impatient boy. "I am sorry that my innocent remarks should have irritated you both. You must school me, Kate," he added, with a forced smile, "what I am to do and say."

And then he went to his room, with a sense

that he had won the victory. And certainly, if a victory is won every time the other side is discomfited, such was the case at this moment. John did not say anything—did not even come to be comforted, but kept walking up and down at the other end of the room. It was Kate who had to go to him, to steal her hand within his arm, to coax him back to his usual composure. And it was a process not very easy to be performed. She moved him quickly enough to tender demonstrations over herself, which indeed she had no objection to, but John was chilled and discouraged and cast down to the very depths.

“He was only cross,” said Kate; “when he is cross I never pay any attention. Something has gone wrong in business, or that sort of thing. John, dear, say you don’t mind. It is not me that am making myself disagreeable: it is only papa.”

But it was hard to get John to respond. Notwithstanding that Mr Crediton had retired and left the field open, and that Kate did all in her power to detain him, the young man left her earlier than usual, and with a suffi-

ciently heavy heart. Kate's father was seeking a quarrel—endeavouring to show him the falseness of his position, and make it plain how obnoxious he was. John walked all the long way home to his little lodgings, which were at the other end of the town, contemplating the dim Sunday streets, all so dark, with gleams of lamplight and dim reflections from the wet pavement—for in the mean time rain had fallen. And this was all he had for all he had sacrificed. He did not reckon Kate herself in the self-discussion. She was worth everything a man could do ; but to be thus chained and bound, within sight, yet shut out from her—to be made the butt of another man's jealous resentment—to have a seeming privilege, which was made into a kind of torture—and to have given his life for this ;—what could he say even to himself ? He sat down in his hard arm-chair and gazed into the flame of his two candles, and felt himself unable to do anything but brood over what had happened. He could not read nor turn his mind from the covert insult, the unwilling consent. And what was to come of it ? John covered his

face with his hands when he came to that part of the subject. There was nothing to look forward to—nothing but darkness. It was natural that she, a spoiled child of fortune, should smile and trust in something turning up; as for John, he saw nothing that could turn up; and in all the world there seemed to him no single creature with less hope of moulding his future according to his wishes than himself.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THIS moment of dismay, however, passed over, as the moments of delight did, without bringing about any absolute revolution in John's life. The next day Mr Crediton took occasion to be more than ordinarily civil, repenting of his bad humour, and Kate stopped short before his window as she rode by to wave her hand to him. A man cannot build the comfort of his life permanently on such trifles; but there is a moment when the wave of a girl's hand as she passes is enough to strengthen and exhilarate his heart. So the crisis blew over as the others had done, and the routine went on. John set his teeth, and confronted his position with all its difficulties, making a desperate effort. A woman might bear such a trial, and live through it; but it is hard upon a man,

when he is no longer a boy, to be called upon to give up everything, to change the entire current of his occupations, and make an unquestionable descent in the social scale, for love, without even giving him its natural compensations. An imprudent marriage is a different thing, for then the consequences are inevitable when once the step has been taken, and have to be borne, will he nill he. But to make love his all—the sole object and meaning of his life—there was in this a certain humiliation which by turns overwhelmed John's fortitude and courage. It was indeed almost a relief to him, and helped him to bear his burden more steadily when the annual removal of the family to Fernwood took place, and Kate vanished from before his eyes. She cried when she parted with him that last Sunday, and John felt a *serrement du cœur* which almost choked him ; but still, at the same time, when it was over and she was gone, life on the whole became easier. He made an effort to interest himself in his brother clerks, and enter into their life ; but what was a humiliation to John was to them such a badge

of superiority that he could make but little of that. He was Mr Crediton's future son-in-law, probably their own future employer, in the eyes of the young men around him, who accepted his advances with a deference and half-concealed pride which threw him back again upon himself. He had no equals, no companions. To be sure there were plenty of people in Camelford who would have been glad to receive Dr Mitford's son, but he had no desire for the ordinary kind of society. And it is not to be described with what pleasure he saw Fred Huntley, a man whom he had never cared for heretofore, push open the swinging door of the bank, and peer round the place with short-sighted eyes. "Mr Mitford, if you please," Fred said, perhaps rather superciliously, to the clerk who was John's superior, expecting, it was clear, to be ushered into some secret retirement where the principals of the bank might be. When John rose from his desk, Huntley gazed at him with unfeigned astonishment. "What! you here!" he said; and opened his eyes still wider when John turned round and explained to Mr Whichelo

that he was going out, and why. "You don't mean to say they stick you at a desk like that, among all those fellows?" Fred said, as they left the bank together; which exclamation of wonder revived the original impatience which use and wont by this time had calmed down.

"Exactly like the other fellows," said John; "and quite right too, or why should I be here?"

"Then I suppose you are—learning—the business," said Fred. "Old Crediton must mean you to be his successor. And that is great luck, though I confess it would not have much charm for me."

"It is very well," said John, "I have nothing to complain of. If I can stick to it I suppose I shall earn some money sooner or later, which is a great matter, all you people say."

"Of course it is a great matter," said Fred. "You told that old fellow you were going out in a wonderful explanatory way, as if you thought he mightn't like it. Can't you stay and have something with me at the hotel? I have to be here all night, much against my will, and I should spend it all alone unless you'll stay."

"Thanks; it does me good to see a known



face. I'll stay if you'll have me," said John ; and then, as it was still daylight, they took a preparatory stroll about the streets of Camel-ford. The inn was in the High Street, not very far from the bank and the Crediton mansion. The young men walked about the twilight streets talking of everything in earth and heaven. It was to John as if they had met in the depths of Africa or at a lonely Indian station. He had never been very intimate with Fred Huntley, but they were of the same class, with something like the same training and associations, and the exile could have embraced the new-comer, who spoke his own language, and put the same meaning to ordinary words as he did. It was a long time before he even noticed the inquiring way in which Huntley looked at him, the half-questions he now and then would put sharply in the midst of indifferent conversation, as if to take him off his guard. John was not on his guard, and consequently the precaution was ineffectual ; but after a while he observed it with a curious sensation of surprise. It was not, however, till they had dined, and were

seated opposite to each other over their modest bottle of claret, that they fairly entered upon personal affairs.

“Do you find the life suit you?” said Fred, abruptly. “I beg your pardon if I am too inquisitive; but of course it must be a great change.”

“I am not sure that it suits me particularly,” said John; but the glance which accompanied the question had been very keen and searching, and somehow, without knowing it, a sense of suspicion ran through him; “I don’t suppose any life does until one is thoroughly used to it. Routine is the grand safeguard in everything—and perhaps more than in anything else to a clerk in a bank.”

“But that is absurd,” said Fred. “How long do you and Mr Crediton mean to keep up the farce? a clerk in the bank betrothed to his daughter—it is too good a joke.”

“I don’t see the farce,” said John, “and neither, I suppose, does Mr Crediton; he is not given to joking. Now tell me, Huntley, before we go any further, is it the dear old people at home who have asked you to come and look

after me? was it—my mother? She might have known I would tell her at first hand anything there was to tell.”

At this speech Fred Huntley became very much confused, though he did not look like a man to be easily put out. He grew red, he cleared his throat, he shuffled his feet about the carpet. “Upon my word you mistake,” he said; “I have not seen either Mrs Mitford or the Doctor since you left.”

“Then who has sent you?” said John.

“My dear fellow, you have grown mighty suspicious all at once. Why should any one have sent me? may not I look up an old friend for my own pleasure? surely we have known each other sufficiently for that.”

“You might,” said John, “but I don’t think that is the whole question, and it would be best to tell me at once what you want to know—I am quite willing to unfold my experiences,” he said, with a forced smile; and then there was a pause——

“The fact of the matter is,” said Fred Huntley, after an interval, with an attempt at jocularity, “that you are an intensely lucky fellow.

What will you say if I tell you that I have just come from Fernwood, and that if any one sent me it was Kate Crediton, wishing for a report as to your health and spirits—though it is not so long since she has seen you, I suppose?”

“*Kate Crediton?*” said John, haughtily.

“I beg your pardon : my sisters are intimate with her, you know, and I hear her called so fifty times in a day—one falls into it without knowing. Hang it! since you will have it, Mitford, Miss Crediton did speak to me before I left. She heard I was coming to Camelford, and she came to me the night before—last night, in fact—and told me you were here alone, and she was uneasy about you. I wish anybody was uneasy about me. She wanted to know if you were lonely, if you were unhappy—half a hundred things. I hope you don’t object to her anxiety. I assure you it conveyed a very delightful idea of your good fortune to me.”

“Whatever Miss Crediton chose to say must have been like herself,” cried John, trembling with sudden passion, “and no doubt she thought you were a very proper ambassador.

But you must be aware, Huntley, that ladies judge very differently on these points from men. If you please we will not go further into that question."

"It was not I who began it, I am sure," said Fred; and another pause ensued, during which John sat with lowering brows, and an expression no one had ever seen on his face before. "Look here, Mitford," said Fred, suddenly, "don't go and vex yourself for nothing. If any indiscretion of mine should make dispeace between you——"

"Pray don't think for a moment that such a thing is likely to happen," said John.

"Well—well—if I am too presumptuous in supposing anything I say to be likely to move you;" Huntley went on, with a restrained smile—"but you really must not do Miss Crediton injustice through any clumsiness of mine. It came about in the most natural way. She was afraid there had been some little sparring between her father and yourself, and was anxious, as in her position it was so natural to be——"

"Exactly," said John. "Are you on your

way home now, or are you going back to Fernwood ? I should ask you to take a little parcel for me if you were likely to be near Fanshawe. How are the birds ? I don't suppose I shall do them much harm this year."

"Oh, they're plentiful enough," said Huntley ; " my father has the house full, and I am not much of a shot, you know. They would be charmed to see you if you would go over for a day or two. I mean to make a run to Switzerland, myself. Vaughan has some wonderful expedition on hand—up the Matterhorn, or something—and I should like to be on the spot."

" Shall you go up with him ? " said John.

" Not I, but I should like to be at hand to pick up what remains of him if he comes to grief—and to share his triumph, of course, if he succeeds," Fred added, with a laugh—" a friend's privilege. Are you going ?—it is scarcely ten o'clock."

" You forget I am a man of business nowadays," said John, with an uncomfortable smile ; and then they stood over the table, facing but not looking at each other ; a suppressed resent-

ment and excitement possessing one, which he was doing his utmost to restrain—and the other embarrassed, with a mixture of charitable vexation and malicious pleasure in the effect he had produced.

“I’ll walk with you,” said Huntley; for to shake hands and separate at this moment would have been something like an irredeemable breach—and that, for two men belonging to the same county, and almost the same set, was a thing to be avoided. John had not sufficient command of himself to make any effusive reply, but he did not object; and presently they were in the street walking side by side and discoursing on every subject except the one in their minds. They had not walked very far, however, before some indefinable impulse made John turn back to cast a glance at the bank—the scene of his daily penance—and the vacant house that stood beside it. They were a good way down the street, on the opposite side. He gave a slight start, which his companion perceived, but offered no explanation of it. “Let us turn back a little, I have forgotten something,” he said. Huntley, who had no parti-

cular interest where they went, turned as he was desired, and was just debating with himself whether, all the due courtesies having been attended to, he might not go into his hotel as they passed it, and leave John at peace to pursue his sullen way. But it occurred to him that John made a half-perceptible pause at the door of the "Greyhound," as if inviting him to withdraw, and this movement decided the question. "Confound the fellow! I'm not going to be dismissed when he pleases," Fred said to himself; and so went on, not knowing where he went.

"I thought so!" cried John, suddenly, in the midst of some philosophical talk, interrupting Fred in the middle of a sentence—and he rushed across the street to the bank, to his companion's utter consternation. "What is the matter?" cried Fred. John dashed at the closed door, ringing the bell violently, and beating with his stick upon the panels. Then he called loudly to a passing policeman—"Knock at the house!" he cried. "Fire! fire! Huntley, for heaven's sake, fly for the engines!—they will let me in and not you, or



I should go myself—don't lose a moment. Fire ! fire ! ”

“ But stop a little,” cried Huntley in dismay, plucking at John's arm ; and what with the sound of the knocking and the peals of the bell which sounded sepulchrally in the empty place, he scarcely could hear his own voice. “ Stop a moment—you are deceiving yourself ; I see no signs of fire.”

“ *You* run ! ” cried John, hoarsely, turning to the policeman, “ or you—five pounds to the man who gets there first ! Signs !—Good God ! the wretches are out. We must break open the door.” And he beat at it, as if he would beat it in, with a kind of frenzy ; while Huntley stood stupefied, and saw two or three of the bystanders, who had already begun to collect, start off with a rush to get the fire-engines. “ There's nobody in the house either, sir, or else I can't make 'em hear,” said the policeman, coming up to John for his orders. “ Then we must break in,” cried John. “ There's a locksmith in the next street : you fly and fetch him, my good fellow. And where shall we get some ladders ? There is a way of getting in

from the house if we were once in the house."

"Not to make too bold, sir," said the policeman, "I'd like to know afore breaking into folks' houses, if you had any title to do the like. You're not Mr Crediton, and he aint got no son——"

John drew himself to his full height, and even then in his excitement glanced at Huntley, who kept by his side, irresolute and ignorant, not knowing what to do. "I am closely connected with Mr Crediton," he said; "nobody can have a better right to look after his affairs; and he is away from home. Get us ladders, and don't let us stand parleying here."

The policeman looked at him for a moment, and then moved leisurely across the street to seek the ladders, while in the mean time the two young men stood in front of the blind house with all its shuttered windows, and the closed door which echoed hollow to John's assault. The dark front so jealously bolted and barred, all dangers without shut out, and the fiery traitor within ravaging at its leisure, drove John wild, excited as he was to begin

with. "Good heavens! to think we must stand here," he said, ringing once more, but this time so violently that he broke the useless bell. They heard it echo shrilly through the silent place in the darkness. "Mr White the porter's gone out for a walk—I seed him," said a boy; "there aint no one there." "But I see no signs of fire," cried Fred. Just then there came silently through the night air a something which contradicted him to his face—a puff of smoke from somewhere, nobody could tell where; and all at once through the freshness of the autumn night the smell of fire suddenly breathed round them. Fred uttered one sharp exclamation, and then stood still, confounded. As for John, he gave a spring at the lower window and caught the iron bar and swung himself up. But the bar resisted his efforts, and there was nothing for it but to wait. When the ladders were at last visible, moving across the gloom, he rushed at them, without taking time to think, and snatching one out of the slow hands of the indifferent bearers, placed it against the wall of the house, while Fred stood observing, and was up almost

at the sill of an unshuttered window on the upper floor before Huntley could say a word. Then Fred contented himself with standing outside and looking on. "One is enough for that sort of work," he said half audibly, and fell into conversation with the policeman, who stood with an anxious countenance beside him. "I hope as the gentleman won't hurt himself," said the policeman. "I hope it's true as he's Mr Crediton's relation, sir. Very excited he do seem, about not much, don't you think, sir? And them engines will be tearing down, running over the children before a man knows."

"Do you think there is not much danger, then?" said Fred.

"Danger!" cried the man—"Lord bless you! if it was a regular fire don't ye think as I'd have noticed it, and me just finished my round not half an hour since? But it's hawful negligent of that fellow White. I knew as he'd been going to the bad for some time back, and I'm almost glad he's catched; but as for fire, sir——"

At this moment another puff of smoke,

darker and heavier, came in a gust from the roof, and the policeman putting his eye to the keyhole, fell back again exclaiming vehemently, "By George! but it is a fire, and the gentleman's right," and sprang his rattle loudly. The crowd round gave a half-cheer of excitement, and up full speed rattled the fire-engines, clearing the way, and filling the air with clangour. At the same moment arrived a guilty sodden soul, wringing his hands, in which was a big key. "Gentlemen," he cried, "I take you to witness as I never was out before. It's an accident as nobody couldn't have foreseen. It's an accident as has never happened before." "Open the door, you ass!" cried Huntley; and then the babel of sounds, the gleams of wild light, the hiss of the falling water, all the confused whirl of circumstance that belongs to such a moment swept in, and took all distinct understanding even from the self-possessed perceptions of Fred.

As for John, when he found himself in the silent house which he had entered from the window, he had no time to think of his sensations. He had snatched the policeman's lan-

tern from his hand ere he made his ascent, and went hastily stumbling through the unknown room, and down the long, echoing stairs, as through a wall of darkness ; projecting before him the round eye of light, which made the darkness if possible more weird and mystical. His heart was very sore ; it pained him physically, or at least he thought it did, lying like a lump of lead in his breast. But he was glad of the excitement which forced his thoughts away from himself. To unbolt the ponderous doors at either end of the passage which led into the bank, took him what seemed an age ; but at last he succeeded in getting them open. A cloud of smoke enveloped him as he went in, and all but drove him back. He burst through it with a confused sense of flames and suffocation, and blazing sheets of red, that waved long tongues towards him to catch him as he rushed through them ; but, notwithstanding, he forced his way into Mr Crediton's room, where he knew there were valuable papers. He thought of nothing as he rushed through the jaws of death ; neither of Kate, nor of his past life, nor of his home, nor of any

of those things which are supposed to gleam upon the mind in moments of supreme danger. He thought only of the papers in Mr Crediton's room. Unconsciously he formed an idea of the origin of the fire, as, panting, choked, and scorched, he gathered, without seeing them, into his arms the box of papers, and seized upon everything he could feel with his hands upon the table. He could see nothing, for his eyes were stinging with the smoke, and scorched with the flames. When he had grasped everything he could feel, with his senses failing him, he pushed blindly for the door, hoping, so far as he had wit enough to hope anything, that he might reach the front of the house, and be able to unloose its fastenings before he gave way. By this time there was a roaring of the fire in his ears; an insufferable smell of burning wood and paint; all his senses were assailed, even that of touch, which recoiled from the heated walls against which he staggered trying to find the door. At last the sharp pain with which he struck violently against it, cutting open his forehead, brought him partially to himself. He half-

staggered half-fell into the passage, dropping upon his knees, for his arms were full, and he had no hand to support himself with. Then all at once a sudden wild gust of air struck him in the face from the other side ; the flames, with (he thought) a cry, leaped at him from behind, and he fell prostrate, clasping tight the papers he had recovered, and knew no more.

It was half an hour later when Fred Huntley, venturing into the narrow hall of the burning house after the first detachment of firemen had entered with their hatchets, found some one lying drenched with water from the engines, and looking like a calcined thing that would drop to powder at a touch, against the wall. The calcined creature moved when it was touched, and gave signs of life ; but every one by this time had forgotten John in the greater excitement of the fire ; and it had not occurred to Huntley even, the only one who knew much about him, to ask what had become of him. He was dragged out, not very gently, to the steps in front ; and there, fortunately for John, was the porter who had



been the cause of all the mischief, and who stood outside wringing his hands, and getting in everybody's way. "Look after him, you!" cried Fred, plunging in again to the heart of the conflict. Some of the clerks had arrived by this time, and were anxiously directing the fire-engines to play upon the strong room in which most of the valuables of the bank were placed. Fred Huntley was not noticeably destitute of courage, but he was more ready to put himself in the front when the pioneers had passed before, and there were plenty of followers to support him behind. He took the command of affairs while John lay moaning, scorched, and drenched on the wet step, with people rushing past him, now and then almost treading on him, and pain gradually rousing him into consciousness. They had tried to take his charge from him and he had resisted, showing a dawn of memory. When the water from the hose struck him again in the face, he struggled half up, and sat and looked round him. "Good Lord, Mr Mitford!" said Mr Whichelo, the chief cashier, discovering him with consternation. "Take me somewhere,"

gasped John ; “ and take care of these,” holding out his innocent booty. Mr Whichelo rushed at him eagerly. “ God bless you !” he cried ; “ it was that I was thinking of. How did you get it ? have you been into the fire and the flames to fetch it, and saved my character ?” cried the poor man, hysterically. “ Hold your tongue, and take me somewhere !” cried John ; and the next moment his senses had once more forsaken him, and he knew nothing about either blaze or flame.

The after incidents of the night, of which John was conscious only by glimpses, were—that he was carried to the inn opposite, his treasures taken from his arms and locked carefully away, and the doctor brought, who examined him, and shook his head, and said a great deal about a shock to the nerves. John was in one of his intervals of consciousness when this was said, and raised himself from the strange distance and dreaminess in which he seemed to be lying. “ I have had no shock to my nerves,” he said. “ I’m burnt and sore and soaking, that’s all. Plaster me or mend me somehow.” And this effort saved him from

the feverish confusion into which he was falling. When he came to himself he felt that he was indeed sore all over, with minute burns in a hundred places about his person ; his hair and his eyelashes scorched off, and his skin all blistered and burning. Perhaps it was the pain which kept him in full possession of his faculties for all the rest of the night. Then he felt it was not the fire he had cared for, nor the possible loss, but only the pure satisfaction of doing something. When they told him the fire was got under, the strong room saved, and that nothing very serious had happened, the news did not in the least excite him. He had asked as if he was profoundly concerned, and he was scarcely even interested. "Pain has often that effect," he heard the doctor say. "This kind of irritating, ever-present suffering, absorbs the mind. Of course he cares. Tell him again, that the news may get into his mind." And then somebody told him again, and John longed to cry, What the devil is that to me ! but restrained himself. It was nothing to him ; and the burning on his skin was not much : it was nothing indeed to the burning in his heart.

She had discussed with another matters which were between themselves. She had sent another to report on his looks and his state of mind ; there was between her and another man a secret alliance which he was not intended to know. The blood seemed to boil in John's veins as he lay tossing through the restless night, trying in vain to banish the thought from him. But the thought, being intolerable, would not be banished. It lay upon him, and tore at him as the vultures tore Prometheus. She had discussed their engagement with Fred Huntley ; taken him into her confidence—that confidence which should have been held sacred to another. John was thrown back suddenly and wildly upon himself. His heart throbbed and swelled as if it would break, and felt as if hot irons had seared it. He imagined them sitting together, talking him over. He even fancied the account of this accident which Huntley would give. He would be at her ear, while John was banished. He denied that it had been a shock to his nerves ; and yet his nerves had received such a shock as he might never recover in his life.

## CHAPTER XVII.

FOR some days after the fire, John continued in a sadly uncomfortable state both of body and mind. The two, indeed, were not dissimilar. He was much burnt, though superficially, and suffered double pangs from the stinging, gnawing, unrelaxing pain. His spirit was burnt too—scorched by sudden flames; stiff and sore all over, like his limbs, with points of exaggerated suffering here and there,—a thing he could not take his thoughts from, nor try to forget. He was very unmanageable by his attendants, was with difficulty persuaded to obey the doctor's prescriptions, and absolutely refused to lay himself up. "The end'll be as you'll kill yourself, sir, and that you'll see," said his landlady. "Not much matter either," John murmured between his teeth. He was smart-

ing all over, as the poor moth is which flies into the candle. It does the same thing over again next minute, no doubt ; and so, probably, would he : but in the mean time he suffered much both in body and mind. He would not keep in bed, or even in-doors, notwithstanding the doctor's orders ; and it was only downright incapacity that kept him from appearing in the temporary offices which had been arranged for the business of the bank. Mr Crediton had come in from Fernwood at once to look after matters ; but on that day John was really ill, and so had escaped the visit which otherwise would have been inevitable. Mr Whichelo came that evening to bring his principal's regrets. "He was very much cut up about not seeing you," said the head-clerk. "You know your own affairs best, and I don't wish to be intrusive ; but I think you would find it work better not to keep him at such a distance."

"I keep Mr Crediton at a distance !" said John, with a grimace of pain.

"You do, Mr Mitford. I don't say that he is always what he might be expected to be ;

but, anyhow, no advances come from your side."

"It is not from my side advances should come," John said, turning his face to the wall with an obstinacy which was almost sullen; while at the same time he said to himself at the bottom of his heart, What does it matter? These were but the merest outward details. The real question was very different. Did a woman know what love meant?—was it anything but a diversion to her—an amusement? was what he was asking himself; while a man, on the other hand, might give up his life for it, and annul himself, all for a passing smile—a smile that was quite as bright to the next comer. Such thoughts were thorns in John's pillow as he tossed and groaned. They burned and gnawed at his heart worse than his outward wounds; and there were no cool applications which could be made to them. He did not want to be spoken to, nor to have even the friendliest light thrown upon the workings of his mind. To be let alone—to be left to make the best of it—to be allowed to resume his work quietly, and go and come, and wait until

the problem had been solved for him, or until he himself had solved it,—it seemed to John that he wished for nothing more.

“That may be,” said Mr Whichelo; “but all the same you don’t take much pains to conciliate him—though that is not my business. A man who has had a number of us round him all his life always anxious to conciliate—as good men as himself any day,” the head-clerk added, with some heat, “but still in a measure dependent upon his will for our bread—it takes a strong head to stand such a strain, Mr Mitford. An employer is pretty near a despot, unless he’s a very good man. I don’t want to say a word against Mr Crediton——”

“Much better not,” said John, with another revulsion of feeling, not indisposed to knock the man down who ventured to thrust in his opinion between Kate’s father and himself; and Mr Whichelo for the moment was silent, with a half-alarmed sense of having gone too far.

“He is very grateful to you for your promptitude and energy,” he continued: “but for you these papers must have been lost. It



would have been my fault," said Mr Whichelo, with animation, yet in a low tone. There was even emotion in his words, and something like a tear in his eye. If he had been a great general or a distinguished artist, his professional reputation could not have been more precious to him. But John was preoccupied, and paid no attention. He did not care for having saved Mr Whichelo's character any more than Mr Crediton's money, though he had, indeed, risked his life to do it. He had been in such a mood that to risk his life was rather agreeable to him than otherwise, not for any "good motive," but simply as he would have thrust his burnt leg or arm into cold water for the momentary relief of his pain.

"Don't let us talk any more about it," he said; "they are safe, I suppose, and there is an end of it. But how I got out of that place," he added, turning himself once more impatiently on his uneasy bed, "is a mystery to me."

"You have your friend to thank for that," said his companion, with the sense that now at last a topic had been found on which it would be safe to speak.

“My—what?” cried John, sitting suddenly upright in his bed.

“Your—friend,—the gentleman who was with you. Good God! this is the worst of all,” cried poor Whichelo, driven to his wits’ end.

And, indeed, for a minute John’s expression was that of a demon. He had some cuts on his forehead, which were covered with plaster; he was excessively pale; one of his arms was bandaged up; and when you have added to all these not beautifying circumstances the dim light thrown upon the bed under its shabby curtains, and the look of horror, dismay, and rage which passed over the unhappy young fellow’s face, poor Mr Whichelo’s consternation may be understood. “My—friend!” he repeated, with a groan. He could not himself have given any reason for it; but it seemed at the moment to be the last and finishing blow.

“Yes,” said Mr Whichelo, “so they told me. He found you lying in the passage with the engines playing upon you, and dragged you out. It was very lucky for you he was there.”

John fell back in his bed with a look of utter weariness and lassitude. “It doesn’t

matter," he said. "But is anybody such a fool as to think that I should have died with the engines playing on me? Nonsense! He need not have been so confoundedly officious: but it don't matter, I tell you," he added, angrily; "don't let us speak of it any more."

"My dear Mr Mitford," said Mr Whichelo, "I don't wish to interfere; but I am the father of a family myself, with grown-up sons, and I don't like to see a young man give way to wrong feeling. The gentleman did a most friendly action. I don't know, I am sure, if you would have died—but—he meant well, there can be no doubt of that."

"Confound him!" said John between his closed teeth. Mr Whichelo was glad he could not quite hear what it was; perhaps, however, he expected something worse than "confound him"—for a sense of horror crept over him, and he was very thankful that he had no closer interest in this impatient young man than mere acquaintanceship—a man who was going in for the Church! he said to himself. He sat silent for a little, and then got up and took his hat.

"I hear you have to be kept very quiet," he said; "and as it is late, I will take my leave. Good evening, Mr Mitford; I hope you will have a good night; and if I can be of any use——"

"Good-night," said John, too much worn to be able to think of politeness. And when Mr Whichelo was gone the doctor came, who gave him a great deal of suffering by way of relieving him. He bore it all in silence, having plenty of distraction afforded him by his thoughts, which were bitter enough. "Doctor," he said, sitting up all at once while his injured arm was being bandaged, "answer me one question: I hear I was found lying somewhere with the engines playing on me; could I have died like that?"

"You might—in time," said the doctor, with a smile, "but not just for as long as the fire lasted; unless you had taken cold, which you don't appear to have done, better luck."

"But there was no other danger?"

"You could not have been burnt alive with the engines playing on you," said the doctor.

"Yes, of course there was danger: the roof

might have fallen in, which it did not—thanks, I believe, to your promptitude; or even if the partition had come down upon you, it would have been far from pleasant; but I should think you have had quite enough of it as it is.”

“I want to make sure,” said the patient, with incomprehensible eagerness, “not for my own sake—but—there never was any real danger? you can tell me that.”

“One can never say as much,” was the answer. “I should not myself like to lie insensible in a burning house, close to a partition which fell eventually. At the least you might have been crippled and disfigured for life.”

A groan burst from John’s breast when he found himself alone on that weary lingering night. How long it seemed!—years almost since the excitement of the fire which had sustained him for the moment, though he was not aware of it. He put his hand up to his eyes, and found that there were tears in them, and despised himself, which added another thorn to his pillow. He had nobody to

console him; nobody to keep him from brooding over the sudden misery. Was it a fit revenge of fate upon him for his feeling of right in regard to Kate? He had felt that he had a right to her because he had saved her life. Was it possible that he had taken an ungenerous advantage of that? He went back over the whole matter, and he said to himself that, had he loved a girl so much out of his sphere, without this claim upon her, he would have smothered his love, and made up his mind from the beginning that it was useless. But the sense that he had saved her life had given him a sense of power—yes, of ungenerous power—over her. And now he himself had fallen into the same subjection. Another man had saved his life; or, at least, was supposed by others, and no doubt would himself believe that he had done so. Fred Huntley, whom she had taken into her confidence, to whom she had described the state of the affairs between them, whose advice almost she had asked on a matter which never should have been breathed to profane ears—Fred Huntley had saved his life. He groaned

in his solitude, and put up his hand to his eyes, and despised himself. "I had better cry over it, like a sick baby," he said to himself, with savage irony ; and oh to think that was all, all he could do !

Next morning John insisted on getting up, in utter disobedience to his doctor. He had his arm in a sling, but what did that matter ? and he had still the plaster on the cuts on his forehead. He tried to read, but that was not possible. He wrote to his mother as best he could with his left hand, telling her there had been a fire, and that he had burned his fingers pulling some papers out of it—"nothing of the least importance," he said. And when he had done that he paused and hesitated. Should he write to Kate ? He had not done it for several days past. It was the longest gap that had ever occurred in their correspondence. His heart yearned a little within him notwithstanding all its wounds ; yet after he had taken up the pen he flung it down again in the sickness of his heart. Why should he write ? She must have heard all about it from Fred Huntley and from her father. She had heard, no doubt, that

Fred had saved his life—and she had taken no notice. Why should she take any notice? It did not humiliate a woman to be under such an obligation, but it did humiliate a man. John rose and stalked about his little room, which scarcely left him space enough for four steps from end to end. He stared out hopelessly at the window which looked into the little humble suburban street with its tiny gardens; and then he went and stared into the little glass over the mantelpiece, which was scarcely tall enough to reflect him unless he stooped. A pretty sight he was to look at; three lines of plaster on his forehead, marks of scorching on his cheek, dark lines of pain under his eyes, and the restless, anxious, uneasy expression of extreme suffering on his scarred face. He was not an Adonis at the best, poor John, and he was conscious of it. What was there in him that she should care for him? She had been overborne by his claim of right over her. It had been ungenerous of him; he had put forth a plea which never ought to be urged, and which another man now had the right of urging over himself. With a groan of



renewed anguish he threw himself down on the little sofa, and leaned his head and his folded arms on the table at which he had been writing his mother's letter. He had nothing to fall back upon : all his life and hopes he had given up for this, and here was what it had come to. He had no capability left in his mind but of despair.

It was, no doubt, because he was so absorbed in his own feelings and unconscious of what was passing, that he heard nothing of any arrival at the door. He scarcely raised his head when the door of his own little sitting-room was opened. "I want nothing, thanks," he said, turning his back on his officious landlady, he thought. She must have come into the room more officious than ever, for there was a faint rustling sound of a woman's dress, and that sense of some one in the room which is so infallible ; but John only turned his back the more obstinately. Then all at once there came something that breathed over him like a wind from the south, something made up of soft touch, soft sound, soft breath. "John, my poor John !" said the voice ; and the touch

was as of two arms going round that poor wounded head of his. It was impossible—it could not be. He suffered his hands to be drawn down from his face, his head to be encircled in the arms, and said to himself that it was a dream. “Am I mad?” he said, half aloud; “am I losing my head?—for I know it cannot be.”

“What cannot be? and why should not it be?” said Kate, in his ear. “Oh, you unkind, cruel John! Did you want me to break my heart without a word or a message from you? Not even to see papa! not to send me a single line! to leave me to think you were dying or something, and you not even in bed. If I were not so glad, I should be in a dreadful passion. You horrid, cruel, brave, dear old John!”

He did not know what to think or say. All his evil thoughts slid away from him unawares, as the ice melts. There was no reason for it; but the sun had shone on them, and they were gone. He took hold of, and kept fast in his, the hands that had touched his aching head. “I do not think it is you,” he

said ; " I am afraid to look lest it should not be you."

" I know better than that," said Kate ; " it is because you will not let me see your face. Poor dear face ! " cried the impulsive girl, and cried a little, and dropped a sudden, soft, momentary kiss upon the scorched cheek. That was her tribute to the solemnity of the occasion. And then she laughed half hysterically. " John, dear, you are so ugly, and I like you so," she said ; and sat down by him, and clasped his arm with both her hands. John's heart had melted into the foolishness and joy by this time. He was so happy that his very pain seemed to him the tingling of pleasure. " I cannot think it is you," he said, looking down upon her with a fondness which could find no words.

" I have come all this way to see him," she cried, " and evidently now he thinks it is not proper. Look, I have brought Parsons with me. There she is standing in the window all this time, not to intrude upon us. Do you think I am improper now ? "

" Hush ! " he said, softly ; " don't blaspheme

yourself. Because I cannot say anything except wonder to feel myself so happy——”

“My poor John, my poor dear old John!” she said, leaning the fairy head against him which ought to have had a crown of stars round it instead of a mite of a bonnet. Kate took no thought of her bonnet at that moment. She sat by his side, and talked and talked, healing his wounds with her soft words. And Parsons drew a chair quietly to her and sat down in the window, turning her back upon the pair. “Lord, if I was to behave like that,” Parsons was saying to herself, “and somebody a-looking on!” And she sat and stared out of the window, and attracted a barrel-organ, which came and played before her, with a pair of keen Italian eyes gleaming at her over it from among the black elf-locks. Parsons shook her head at the performer; but her presence was enough for him, and he kept on grinding “*La Donna é Mobile*” slowly and steadily, through her thoughts and through the murmuring conversation of the other two. Neither Kate nor John paid any attention to the music. They had not heard it, they

would have said ; and yet it was strange how the air would return to both of them in later times.

“ I see now you could not write,” said Kate ; “ but still you have scribbled something to your mother. I think I might have had a word too. But I did not come to scold you. Oh, that horrid organ-man, I wish he would go away ! You might have sent me a message by papa.”

“ I did not see him,” said John.

“ Or by Fred Huntley. You saw him, for he told me——John ! what is the matter ? Are you angry ? Ought I not to have come ?”

Then there was a pause ; he had drawn his arm away out of her clasping hands, and all at once the tingling which was like pleasure became pain again, and gnawed and burned him as if in a sudden endeavour to overcome his patience. And yet it was so difficult to look down upon the flushed wondering face, the eyes wide open with surprise, the bewildered look, and remain unkind to her. For it was unkind to pull away the arm which she was clasping with both her hands. He felt him-

self a barbarian, and yet he could not help it. Huntley's name was like a shot in the heart to him. And the organ went on with its creaks and jerks, playing out its air. "That organ is enough to drive one wild," he said, pettishly, and felt that he had committed himself, and was to blame.

"Is it only the organ?" said Kate, relieved. "Yes, is it not dreadful? but I thought you were angry with me. Oh, John, I don't think I could bear it if I thought you were really angry with me."

"My darling! I am a brute," he said, and put the arm which he had drawn so suddenly away round her. He had but one—the other was enveloped in bandages and supported in a sling.

"Does it hurt?" said Kate, laying soft fingers full of healing upon it. "I do so want to hear how it all happened. Tell me how it was. They say the bank might all have been burned down if you had not seen it, and papa would have lost such heaps of money. John, dear, I think you will find papa easier to manage now."

“Do you think so?” he said, with a faint smile; “but that is buying his favour, Kate.”

“Never mind how we get it, if we do get it,” cried Kate. “I am sure I would do anything to buy his favour—but I cannot go and save his papers and do such things for him. Or, John, was it for me?” she said, lowering her voice, and looking up in his face.

“No, I don’t think it was for you,” he answered, rather hoarsely; “and it was not for him. I did it because I could not help it, and to escape from myself.”

“To escape from yourself! Why did you want that?” she said, with an innocent little cry of astonishment. It was clear she was quite unaware of having done him any wrong.

“Kate, Kate,” he said, holding her close, “you did not mean it; but why did you take Fred Huntley into your confidence—why did you speak to him about you and me?”

She gave him a wondering look, and then the colour rose into her cheek. “John!” she said, in a tone of amazement, “what is this about Fred Huntley? Are you jealous of him

—jealous of *him*? Oh, I hope I am not quite so foolish as that.”

Was that all she was going to say? No disclaimer of having given him her confidence, nothing about her part in the matter, only about his. Was he jealous? the question sank into John’s heart like a stone.

“I don’t know if I am jealous,” he said, with a falter in his voice, which went to Kate’s impressionable heart. “It must be worse to me than it is to you, or you would not ask me. To have said anything to anybody about us, Kate!”

“I see,” she said, holding away from him a little; “I see,”—and was silent for two seconds at least, which felt like two hours to them both. And the man went on playing “*La Donna é Mobile*,”—and Parsons, very red in the face, kept shaking her head at him, but did not attempt to leave her post. Then Kate turned and lifted her pretty eyes, full of tears, to her lover’s face, and spoke in his very ear. “John, it was very silly of me, and thoughtless, and nasty, I see. But I have had nobody to tell me such things. I have never had a



mother like you ; I say whatever comes into my head. John ! I am so sorry——”

Could he have let her say any more ? he ended the sweet confession as lovers use ; he held her to him, and healed himself by her touch, by her breath, by the softness of her caressing hands. He forgot everything in the world but that she was there. She had meant no harm, she had thought no harm. It was her innocence, her ignorance, that had led her into this passing error, and foolish John was so happy that all his sufferings passed from his mind.

“ His old remembrances went from him wholly,  
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.”

Everything smiled and brightened before him ; the organ-grinder stopped and found out from poor Parsons’s perpetual gesticulations that pennies were not to be expected ; and something soft and tranquil and serene seemed to steal into the room and envelop the two, who were betrothing themselves over again, or so they thought. “ Papa says you are to come to Fernwood. You must come and let me nurse you,” Kate whispered in his ear. “ That would

be too sweet," John whispered back again ; and then she opened the note to his mother and wrote a little postscript to it, with his arm round her, and his poor scarred face over her shoulder watching every word as she wrote it. "He looks so frightful," Kate wrote, "you never saw any one so hideous, dear mamma, or such a darling [don't shake my arm, John]. I never knew how nice he was, nor how fond I was of him, till now."

This was how the day ended which had been begun in such misery ; for it was nearly dusk when Kate left him with the faithful Parsons. "Indeed you shall not come with me," she said, "you who ought to be in bed——" but, notwithstanding this protest and all his scars, he went with her till they came within sight of the bank, where the carriage was standing. Of course it did him harm, and the doctor was very angry ; but what did John, in the delight of his heart, care for that ?

## CHAPTER XVIII.

A DAY or two after this visit John found himself at Fernwood.

It was not perhaps a judicious step for any of them. He came still suffering—and, above all, still marked by his sufferings—among a collection of strangers to whom the bank, and the fire, and the value of the papers he had saved, were of the smallest possible consequence, and who were intensely mystified by his heterogeneous position as at once the betrothed of Kate Crediton and a clerk in her father's bank. Then there was a sense of embarrassment between him and Mr Crediton which it was impossible either to ignore or to make an end of—John had done so much for the man who was so unwilling to grant him anything in return. He had not only saved the banker's daughter,

but his papers, perhaps his very habitation, and the bulk of all he had in the world, and Mr Crediton was confused by such a weight of obligations. "I must take care he don't save my life next," he said to himself; but, notwithstanding this weight of gratitude which he owed, he was not in the least changed in his reluctance to pay. To give his child as salvage-money was a thing he could not bear to think of; and when he looked at John's pale face among the more animated faces round him, Mr Crediton grew wellnigh spiteful. "That fellow! without an attraction!"—he would say to himself. John was not handsome; he had little of the ready wit and ready talk of society; he did not distinguish himself socially above other men; he was nobody to speak of—a country clergyman's son without a penny. And yet he was to have Kate! Mr Crediton asked himself why he had ever consented to it, when he saw John's pale face at his table. He had done it—because Kate had set her heart upon it—because he thought Kate would be fickle and change her mind—because—he could scarcely tell why; but always with the thought

that it would come to nothing. He would not allow, when any one asked him, that there was an engagement. "There is some nonsense of the kind," he would say, "boy and girl trash. I take it quietly because I know it never can come to anything. He saved her that time her horse ran away with her, and it is just a piece of romantic gratitude on her part. If I opposed it I should make her twice as determined, and therefore I don't oppose." He had said as much to almost everybody at Fernwood, though neither of the two most immediately concerned were aware. And this was another reason why the strangers were mystified, and could not make out what it meant.

As for Kate, though she had been so anxious for his coming, it cannot be said that it made her very happy; for the first time the complications of the matter reached her. She was not, as when she had been at Fanshawe, a disengaged young lady able to give up her time to her lover, but, on the contrary, the mistress of the house, with all her guests to look after, and a thousand things to think of. She could not sit and talk with him, or walk with him, as she

had done at the Rectory. He could not secure the seat next to her, or keep by her side, as, in other circumstances, it would have been so natural for him to do. He got her left hand at table the first day of his arrival, and was happy, and thought this privilege was always to be his; but, alas! the next day was on the other side, unable so much as to catch a glimpse of her. "I am the lady of the house. I have to be at everybody's beck and call," she said, trying to smooth him down. "On the contrary, you ought to do just what you please," said foolish John; and he wandered about all day seeking opportunities to pounce upon her—for, to be sure, he cared for nobody and nothing at Fernwood but Kate, and he was ill and sensitive, and wanted to be cared for, even petted, if that could have been. He could not go out to ride with the rest of the party on account of his injured hand, but Kate had to go, or thought she must, leaving him alone to seek what comfort was possible in the library. No doubt it was very selfish of John to wish to keep her back from anything that was a pleasure to her, but then he was an eager,

ardent lover, who had been much debarred from her society, and was set on edge by seeing others round her who were more like her than he was. To be left behind, or to find himself shut out all day from so much as a word with her, was one pang ; but to find even when he was with her, that he had little to say that interested her, and to see her return to the common crowd as soon as any excuse occurred to make it possible, was far harder and struck more deep. He would sit in a corner of the drawing-room and look and listen while the conversation went on. They talked about the people they knew, the amusements they had been enjoying, the past season and the future one, and a hundred little details which only persons in their own "set" could understand. John himself could have talked such talk in college rooms or the chambers of a friend, but he would have thought it rude to continue when strangers were present ; but the fashionable people did not think it rude. And even when he was leaning over her chair whispering to her, he could note that Kate's attention failed, and could see her face brighten

and her ear strain to hear some petty joke bandied about among the others. "Was it Mr Lunday that said that? it is so like him," she said once in the very midst of something he was saying. And poor John's heart sank down—down to his very boots.

And then Kate had a hundred things to do in concert with her other guests. She sang with one, and John did not sing, and had to look on with the forlornest thoughts, while a precious hour would pass, consumed by duet after duet and such talk as the following:—"Do you know this?" "Let us try that." "I must do something to amuse all those people," she would say, when he complained. She was not angry with him for complaining, but always kind and sweet, and ready, if she gave him nothing else, to give him one of her pretty smiles.

"But I shall be gone directly, and I have not had ten minutes of you," he said, bitterly.

"Oh, a great deal more than ten minutes," said Kate; "you unkind, exacting John! When I was at Fanshawe I had all my time on my hands, and nobody but you to think of;—I



mean, no other claims upon me. Don't you think it hurts me as much as any one, when they all crowd round me, and I see your dear old face, looking so pale and glum, on the outside? Please don't look so glum! You know I should so much, much rather be with you."

"Should you?" said John, mournfully. Perhaps she believed it; but he found it so very hard to believe. "Dear, I don't mean to be glum, and spoil your pleasure," he said, with a certain pathetic humility; "perhaps I had better go and get to my work again, and wait for the old Sunday nights when you come back."

"That will look as if you were angry with me," she said. "Oh, John, I thought you would understand! You know I can't do what I would do with all these people in the house. What I should like would be to nurse you and take care of you, and be with you always; but what can I do with all these girls and people? I hate them sometimes, though they are my great friends. Don't go and make me think you are angry. It is *that* that would spoil my pleasure. Look here! come and get

your hat, and bring me a shawl ; there is time for a little walk before the dinner-bell rings."

And then the poor fellow would be rapt into paradise for half an hour under shadow of the elm-trees, which were beginning to put on their bright - coloured garments. His reason told him how vain this snatch of enjoyment was, and gave him many a warning that he was spending his life for nought, and giving his treasure for what was not bread ; but at such moments John would not listen to the voice of reason. Her hands were on his arm — her head inclining towards him, sometimes almost touching his sleeve—her eyes raised to his—her smile and her sweet kind words all his own. She was as kind as if she had been his mother—as tender and affectionate and forbearing with him. "Don't be so cross and so exacting. Because I am fond of you, is that any reason why you should tyrannise over me?" said Kate, with a voice as of a dove close to his ear. And how could he answer her but with abject protestations of penitence and ineffable content ?

"It is because I hunger for you—and I have

so little of my darling," said repentant John ; "what do I care for all the world if I have not my Kate?"

"But you have your Kate, you foolish boy," she said ; "and what does anything matter when you know that? Do I ever distrust you? When I see you talking to somebody at the very other end of the drawing-room, just when I am wanting you perhaps, I don't make myself wretched, as you do. I only say to myself, Never mind, he is my John and not hers ; and I am quite happy—though I am sure a girl has a great deal more cause to be uneasy than a man."

And when John had been brought to this point, he would swallow such a speech, and would not allow himself to ask whether it was possible that his absence at the other end of the drawing-room could make Kate wretched. Had he put the question to himself, no doubt Reason would have come in ; but why should Reason be allowed to come in to spoil the moments of happiness which came so rarely? He held the hands which were clasped on his arm closer to his side,

and gave himself up to the sweetness. And he kept her until ever so long after the dressing-bell had pealed its summons to them under the silent trees. It was the stillest autumn night—a little chill, with a new moon which was just going to set as the dining-room was lighted up for dinner—and now and then a leaf detached itself in the soft darkness, and came down with a noiseless languid whirl in the air, like a signal from the unseen. One of these fell upon Kate's pretty head as she raised it towards her lover, and he lifted the leaf from her hair and put it into his coat. "I will give you a better flower," said Kate; "but oh, John, I must go in. I shall never have time to dress. Well——then, just one more turn: and never say I am not the most foolish yielding girl that ever was, doing everything you like to ask—though you scold me and threaten to go away."

This interview made the evening bearable for John; and it was all the more bearable to him, though it is strange to say so, because Fred Huntley had returned, and sat next him

at dinner. He had hated Fred for some days, and was not yet much inclined towards him ; but still there was a pleasure in being able to talk freely to some one, and to feel himself, to some extent at least, comprehended, position and all. He was very dry and stiff to Huntley at first, but by degrees the ice broke. "I have never seen you since that night," said Fred. "My heart has smote me since for the way in which I left you, lying on those door-steps. In that excitement one forgets everything. But you bear considerable marks of it, I see."

"Nothing to signify," said John ; and Fred gave him a nod, and began to eat his soup with an indifference which was balm to the other's excited feelings. Finding thus that no gratitude was claimed of him, John grew generous. "I hear it was you who dragged me out ; and I have never had a chance of thanking you," he said.

"Thanking me—what for?" I don't remember dragging any one out," said Fred. "It was very hot work. I did not rush into the thick of it, like you, to do any good ; but

I daresay I could give the best description of it. Have they found out how much damage was done?—but I suppose the bank is still going on all the same.”

“Banks cannot stop,” said John, “unless things are going very badly with them indeed.”

“That comes of going in for a special study,” said Huntley; “you always did know all about political economy, didn’t you? No, it wasn’t you, it was Sutherland—never mind; if you have not studied it theoretically, you have practically. I often think if I had gone in for business it would have been better for me on the whole.”

“You have less occasion to say so than most men,” said John.

“Because we are well off?—or because I have got my fellowship, and that sort of thing? I don’t know that it matters much. A man has to work—or else,” said Fred, with a sigh, swallowing something more than that *entrée*, “he drifts somehow into mischief whether he will or no.”

Did he cast a glance at the head of the table

as he spoke, where Kate sat radiant, dispensing her smiles on either hand? It was difficult to imagine why he did so, and yet so it seemed. John looked at her too, and for the moment his heart failed him. Could he say, as she herself had suggested, "After all, she is my Kate and no one's else," as she sat there in all her splendour? What could he give her that would bear comparison? Of all the men at her father's table, he was the most humble. At that moment he caught Kate's eye, and she gave him the most imperceptible little nod, the brightest momentary glance. She acknowledged him when even his own faith failed him. His heart came bounding up again to his breast, and throbbed and knocked against it, making itself all but audible in a kind of shout of triumph. Then he turned half round to his companion, with heightened colour, and an animation of manner which was quite unusual to him. He found Huntley's eyes fixed upon his face, looking at him with grave, wondering, almost sympathetic interest. Of course Fred's countenance changed as soon as he found that it was perceived, and sank into the ordinary expression-

less look of good society. He was the spectator looking on at this drama, and felt himself so much better qualified to judge than either of those more closely concerned.

"How do you like Fernwood?" Huntley began, with some precipitation. "It is rather too full to be pleasant while you are half an invalid, isn't it? Does your arm give you much pain?"

"It is very full," said John, "and one is very much alone among a crowd of people whom one does not know."

"You will soon get to know them," said Fred, consolingly; "people are very easy to get on with nowadays on the whole."

"I am going away on Thursday," said John.

"What! the day after to-morrow? before your arm is better, or—anything different? Do you know, Mitford, I think you stand a good deal in your own light."

"That may be," John said, hotly, "but there are some personal matters of which one can only judge for one's self."

Fred made no answer to this; he shrugged his shoulders a little as who should say, It is



no business of mine, and began to talk of politics and the member for Camelford, about whose election there were great searchings of heart in the borough and its neighbourhood. An inquiry was going on in the town, and disclosures were being made which excited the district. The two young men turned their thoughts, or at least their conversation, to that subject, and seemed to forget everything else ; but whether the election committee took any very strong hold upon them, or if they were really much interested about the doings of the Man in the Moon, it would be hard to say.

The drawing-room was very bright and very gay that evening—like a scene in a play, John was tempted to think. There was a great deal of music, and he sat in his corner and looked and saw everything, and would have been amused had he felt no special interest in it. Kate was in the very centre of it all, guiding and directing, as it was natural she should be. The spectator in the corner watched her by the piano, now taking a part, now accompanying, now throwing herself back into her chair with an air of relief when something elaborate had

been set agoing, and whispering and smiling behind her fan to some favoured being, though never to himself. At one moment his vague pain in watching her rose to a positive pang. It was when Fred Huntley was the person with whom she talked. He was stooping down over her, leaning on the back of a chair, and Kate's face was raised to him and half screened with her fan. Their talk looked very confidential, very animated and friendly ; and it seemed to John (but that must have been a mistake) that she gave him just the tips of her fingers as she dismissed him. Fred rose from the chair on which he had been half kneeling with a little movement of his head, which Kate reciprocated, and went off upon a meandering passage round the room. She had given him some commission, John felt—to him, and not to me, he said bitterly in his heart, and then tried to comfort himself, not very successfully, with the words she had taught him, “ After all, she is my Kate and not his.” Was she John's ? or was it all a dream and phantasmagoria, that might vanish in an instant and leave no trace behind ? He covered his eyes with his hand for a second in

the sickness of jealous love with which he was struggling ; but when he looked up again, found that a new revelation waited him, harder than anything he had yet had to undergo. It was that Fred Huntley was approaching himself, and that the mission with which Kate, giving him the tips of her fingers, had intrusted the man to whom of all others he felt most antagonistic, concerned himself. Fred managed the business very cleverly, and would have taken in any unsuspecting person ; but John, on the contrary, was horribly suspicious, looking for pricks at all possible points. The ambassador threw himself into a vacant chair which happened to be handy, and stretched himself out comfortably in it, and said nothing for a minute. Then he yawned (was that, too, done on purpose ?) and turned to John. " Were you asleep, Mitford ? " he said ; " I don't much wonder. It's very amusing, but it's very monotonous night after night."

" I have not had so much of it as you have, to get so tired," said John.

" Well, perhaps there is something in that ; and, after all, there are some nice people here.

The worst for a new-comer," said Fred, poisoning himself lazily in his chair, "is, that everybody has made acquaintance before he comes; and till he has been here for some time and gets used to it, he is apt to feel himself left out in the cold. Of course you can't have any such sensations in this house—but *I* have felt it; and Ka—Miss Crediton, though she is an admirable hostess, can't be everywhere at once."

"But she can send ambassadors," said John, with a faint attempt at a smile.

"Oh yes; of course she can send ambassadors," said Huntley, confused, "when she has any ambassadors to send. I wanted to ask you, Mitford, about that archæological business your father takes so much interest in. I hear they are to visit Dulchester——"

"Did she tell you that?" said John. "My dear fellow, say to me plainly, I have been sent to talk to you and draw you out. That is reasonable and comprehensible, and I should not be ungrateful. But never mind my father. Let us talk since we are required to do so. When are you likely to be at Westbrook? I want to go home one of these days; and

my mother would like to see you, to thank you——”

“To thank me for what?” said Fred, with much consternation.

“For dragging me out of that fire. I don’t say for saving my life, for it did not come to that—but still you have laid me under a great obligation,” said John, with a setting together of his teeth which did not look much like gratitude; and then he rose up suddenly and went away out of his corner, leaving Huntley alone there, and not so happy as his wont. As for John himself, he was stung to exertions quite unusual to him. He went and talked politics, and university talk, and sporting talk, with a variety of men. He did not approach any of the ladies—his heart was beating too fast for that; but he stood up in the doorway and against the wall wherever the men of the party most congregated. And he never so much as looked at the creature who was at once his delight and his torment during all the long weary tedious evening, which looked as if it never would come to an end and leave him at peace.

## CHAPTER XIX.

NEXT morning John packed himself up before he saw any one. He had not slept all night. It is true that the incidents of the past evening had been trifling enough—not of sufficient consequence to affect, as his sudden departure might do, the entire complexion of his life. It was only as a climax, indeed, that they were of any importance at all; but as such, they had wound him up to a point of resolution. The present state of affairs, it was evident, could not go on. Had he been a mere idle man of society, he said to himself, in whose life this perpetual excitement might supply a painful-pleasant sensation, then it might have been possible; but he could not, love as he might, wear away his existence in watching a girl's face, or waiting for such moments of her

society as she might be able to give him. It was impossible : better to go away where he should never see her again ; better to give up for ever all the joys of life, than wear out every vestige of manliness within him in this hopeless way. He had been born to higher uses and better purposes surely, or where was the good of being born at all ? Accordingly he prepared all his belongings for instant departure. Kate was still dearer to him than anything in earth or heaven, he acknowledged with a sigh ; but unless perhaps time or Providence might arrange the terms of their intercourse on a more possible footing, that intercourse for the present must be suspended. He could not go on. With this resolution in his mind he went down-stairs ; and looked so pale, that he attracted the attention of the lady who sat next to him at the breakfast-table, where Kate, who was so often late, had not yet appeared.

“ I am afraid you are ill,” she said ; “ I fear your arm pains you more than usual. I think I knew your mother, Mr Mitford, a thousand years ago. Was not she a Miss Olive, of Bur-

ton? Ah, yes! I remember—one of the prettiest girls I ever saw. I think—you are a little like her,” said this benevolent woman, with a slight hesitation. And then there was a titter at the table, in which John did not feel much disposed to join.

“Oh no,” cried Kate, who had just come in; “it is not him that is like Mrs Mitford, but *me*. I allow he is her son, but that does not matter. I was at Fanshawe Regis ever so long in summer. Mr John, tell Lady Winton she was like me when she was a girl, and I shall be like her when I am an old lady. You know it is so.”

And she paused a moment just beside him, with her hand on Lady Winton’s chair, and looked into John’s pale face as he rose at her appeal. Something was wrong—Kate was not sure what. Lady Winton, perhaps, had been annoying him with questions, or Fred Huntley with criticism. It did not occur to her that she herself could be the offender. She looked into John’s face, meaning to say a thousand things to him with her eyes, but his were blank, and made no reply.



“She was prettier than you are, Kate,” said Lady Winton, with a smile.

“Nay,” said John, unawares. He had not meant to enter into the talk—but to look at her standing there before him in her fresh morning dress, in all her perfection of youth and sweetness, and to believe that anybody had ever been more lovely, was impossible. At that moment, when he was about to leave her, he could have bent down and kissed the hem of her dress. It seemed the only fitting thing to do, but it could not be done before all these people. Kate was still more and more perplexed what he could mean. His eyes, which had been blank, lighted up all in a moment, and spoke things to her which she could not understand. What was the meaning of the pathos in them—the melancholy, the dumb appeal that almost made her cry? She gave a little laugh instead, much fluttered and disturbed in her mind the while, and nodded her head and went on to her seat at the head of the table.

“When one’s friends begin to discuss one’s looks, don’t you think it is best to withdraw?”

she said. "Oh, thanks, Madeline, for doing my duty. It is so wretched to be late. Please, somebody, have some tea."

And then the ordinary talk came in and swept this little episode out of sight.

When breakfast was over, and one after another the guests began to disperse to their morning occupations, Kate, turning round to accompany one of the last to the morning room, where all the embroidery and the practising and the gossip went on, had her uncomfortable thoughts brought back in a moment by the sight of John standing right in her way, holding out his hand. "I am obliged to go away," he said, in the most calm tone he could muster. "Good-bye, Miss Crediton; and thanks, many thanks."

"Going away!" cried Kate, standing still in her amazement. "Going away! Has anything happened at Fanshawe Regis—— Your mother—or Dr Mitford——?"

"They are both well," he said. "I am not going to Fanshawe, only back to the town to my work. Good-bye."

"I must hear about this," said Kate, abruptly.

“Please don’t wait for me, Madeline ; I want to speak to Mr Mitford. Go on, and I will join you. Oh, John, what does it mean ?” she cried, turning to her lover, almost without waiting until the door had closed on her companion. By this time everybody was gone, and the two were left alone in the great empty room where five minutes ago there had been so much sound and movement. They were standing in front of one of the deeply-recessed windows, with the light falling direct upon them as on a stage. He held out his hand again and took hers, which she was too much disturbed to give.

“It is nothing,” he said, with a forlorn sort of smile, “except just that I must go away. Don’t let that cloud your face, dear. I can’t help myself. I am obliged to go.”

“Is any one ill ?” she cried ; “is that the reason ? Oh, John, tell me ! are you really *obliged* to go ? Or is it—anything—we have done ?”

“No,” he said, holding her hand in his. “It is all my fault. It does not matter. It is that I cannot manage this sort of life. No

blame to you, my darling. Don't think I am blaming you. When I am back at my work, things will look different. I was not brought up to it, like you. You must pardon me as you would pardon me for being ignorant and not knowing another language; but it is best I should go away."

"John!" she cried, the tears coming with a sudden rush into the wondering eyes that had been gazing at him so intently, "what have I done?"

"Nothing—nothing," he said, stooping over her hand and kissing it again and again. "There is only myself to blame. I can't take things, I suppose, as other people do. I am exacting and inconsiderate and—— Never mind, dear, I must go away; and you will not remember my faults when I am gone."

"But I never thought you had any faults," cried Kate. "You speak as if it were me. I never have found fault with you, John—nor asked anything more—nor—— I know I am silly. Tell me, and scold me, and forgive me. Say as papa does—it is only Kate. I know I did not mean it. Oh, John, dear, if I beg

your pardon, though I don't know what I have done——”

“ You have done nothing,” he cried, in despair. “ Oh, my Kate ! are you my Kate ? or are you a witch coming into my arms to distract me from everything ? No, no, no ! I must not be conquered this time. My love, it will be best for both of us. I cannot go on seeing you always within my reach and always out of my reach. I would have you always like this—always here—always mine ; but I can't have you ; and I have no strength to stand by at a distance and look on. Do you understand me now ? I shall go away so much happier because of this five minutes. Good-bye.”

“ But, John !” she cried, clinging to him, “ don't go away ; why should you go away ? I will do anything you please. I will—make a change ; don't go and leave me. I want you to be here.”

“ You break my heart !” he cried ; “ but I cannot be here. What use is it to you ? And to me it is distraction. Kate ! don't ask me to stay.”

"But it is of use to me," she said, with a flush on her face, and an expression unlike anything he had seen before—an uneasy look, half of shame and half of alarm. Then she turned from him a little, with a slight change of tone. "It is a strange way of using me," she said, looking steadfastly at the carpet, "after my going to you, and all; not many girls would have gone to you as I did; you might stay now when I ask you—for my sake."

"I will do anything in the world for your sake," he said; "but, Kate, it does you no good, you know. It is an embarrassment to you," John went on, with a half-groan escaping him, "and it is distraction to me."

Then there followed a pause. She drew her hand away from his with a little petulant movement. She kept her eyes away from him, not meeting his, which were fixed upon her. Her face glowed with a painful heat; her little foot tapped the carpet. "Do you mean that—other things—are to be over too?" she said; and twisted her fingers together, and gazed out of the window, waiting for what he had to say.

Such a question comes naturally to the mind of a lover whenever there is any fretting of his silken chain ; and accordingly it was not novel to John's imagination—but it struck upon his heart as if it had been a blow. “Surely not—surely not,” he answered, hastily ; “not so far as I am concerned.”

And then they stood again—for how long ?—side by side, not looking at each other, waiting a chance word to separate or to reunite them. Should she be able to bear her first rebuff ? she, a spoiled child, to whom everybody yielded ? Or could she all in a moment learn that sweet philosophy of yielding in her own person, which makes all the difference between sorrow and unhappiness ? Everything—the world itself—seemed to hang in the balance for that moment. Kate terminated it suddenly, in her own unexpected way. She turned on him all at once, with the sweetness restored to her face and her voice, and held out her hand : “Neither shall it be so far as I am concerned,” she said. “Since you must go, good-bye, John !”

And thus it came to an end. When he was

on his way back to Camelford, and the visit to Fernwood, with all its pains and pleasures, and the last touch of her hand, were things of the past, John asked himself, with a lover's ingenuity of self-torment, if this frank sweetness of reply was enough? if she should have let him go so easily? if there was not something of relief in it? He drove himself frantic with these questions, as he made his way back to his poor little lodgings. Mr Crediton had looked politely indifferent, rather glad than otherwise, when he took his leave. "Going to leave us?" Mr Crediton had said. "I am very sorry; I hope it is not any bad news. But perhaps you are right, and perfect quiet will be better for your arm. Never mind about business—you must take your own time. If you see Whichelo, tell him I mean to come in on Saturday. I am very sorry you have given us so short a visit. Good-bye." Such was Mr Crediton's farewell; but the young man made very little account of that. Mr Crediton's words or ways were not of so much importance to him as one glance of Kate's eye. What she meant by her dismay



and distress, and then by the sudden change, the sweet look, the good-bye so kindly, gently said, was the question he debated with himself; and naturally he had put a hundred interpretations upon it before he reached his journey's end.

It was still but mid-day when he reached the little melancholy shabby rooms which were his home in Camelford. The place might be supportable at night, when he came in only for rest after the day's labours, though even then it was dreary enough; but what could be thought of it in the middle of a bright autumn day, when the young man came in and closed his door, and felt the silence hem him in and enclose him, and "put seals, as it were, to the grave in which he had buried himself. Full day and nothing to do, and a little room to walk about in, four paces from one side to the other—and a suburban street to look out upon, with blinds drawn over the windows, and plants shutting out the air, and an organ grinding melancholy music forth along each side of the way: could he stay still and bear it? When he was at Fernwood his rooms

looked to him like a place of rest, where he could go and hide himself and be at peace. But as soon as he had entered them, it was Fernwood that grew lovely in the distance, where Kate was, where there were blessed people who would be round her all day long, and the stir of life, and a thousand pleasant matters going on. He was weary and sick of himself, and sick of the world. Could he sit down and read a novel in the light of that October day—or what was he to do?

The end was that he took his portmanteau, which had not been unpacked, and threw it into a passing cab, and went off to the railway. He had not gone home since he came to his clerkship in the bank, and that was three months since. It seemed the only thing that was left for him to do now. He went back along the familiar road with something of the feelings of a prodigal approaching his home. It seemed strange to him when the porter at the little roadside station of Fanshawe touched his cap, and announced his intention of carrying Mr John's portmanteau to the Rectory. He felt it strange that the poor fellow should remember

him. Surely it was years since he had been there before.

And this feeling grew as John walked slowly along the quiet country road that led to his home. Everything he passed was associated with thoughts which were as much over and gone as if they had happened in a different existence. He had walked along by these hedgerows pondering a thousand things, but scarcely one that had any reference to, any relation with, his present life. He had been a dreamer, planning high things for the welfare of the world ; he had been a reformer, rousing, sometimes tenderly, sometimes violently, the indifferent country from its slumbers ; sometimes, even, retiring to the prose of things, he had tried to realise the details of a clergyman's work, and to fit himself into them, and ask himself how he should perform them. But never, in all these questionings, had he thought of himself as a banker's clerk—a man working for money alone, and the hope of money. It was so strange that he did not know what to make of it. As he went on, the other John, his former self, seemed to go with

him—and which was the real man, and which the phantom, he could not tell. All the quiet country lifted prevailing hands, and laid hold on him as he went home. It looked so natural—and he, what was he? But the country, too, had changed as if in a dream. He had left it in the full blaze of June, and now it was October, with the leaves in autumn glory, the fields reaped, the brown stubble everywhere, and now and then in the clear blue air the crack of a sportsman's gun. All these things had borne a different aspect once to John. He too had been a little of a sportsman, as was natural; but the dog and the gun did not harmonise with the figure of a banker's clerk. The women on the road, who stared at him, and curtsied to him with a smile of recognition, confused him, he could not tell why. It was so strange that everybody should recognise him—he who did not recognise himself.

And as he approached the Rectory, a vague sense that something must have happened there, came over him. It was only three days since he had received a letter from his mother full of those cheerful details which it cost her,

though he did not know it, so much labour and pain to write. He tried to remind himself of all the pleasant everyday gossip, and picture of things serene and unchangeable which she had sent him ; but still the nearer he drew and the more familiar everything became, the more he felt that something must have happened. He went in by the little garden-gate, which opened noiselessly, and made his way through the shrubbery, to satisfy himself that no cloud of calamity had fallen upon the house. It was a warm genial autumn day, very still, and somewhat pathetic, but almost as balmy as summer. And the drawing-room window stood wide open as it had done through all those wonderful June days when John's life had come to its climax. The lilies had vanished that stood up in great pyramids against the buttresses ; even their tall green stalks were gone, cut down to the ground ; and there were no roses, except here and there a pale monthly one, or a half-nipped, half-open bud. John paused under the acacia-tree where he had so often placed Kate's chair, and which was now littering all

the lawn round about with its leaflets—to gain a glimpse, before he entered, of what was going on within. The dear, tender mother! to whom he had been everything—all her heart had to rest on. What had she to recompense her for all the tender patience, all the care and labour she took upon herself for the sake of her Saviour and fellow-creatures! Her son, who had taken things for granted all this time as sons do, opened his eyes suddenly as he stood peeping in like a stranger, and began to understand her life. God never made a better, purer woman; she had lived fifty years doing good and not evil to every soul around her, and what had she in return? A husband, who thought she was a very good sort of ignorant foolish little woman on the whole, and very useful in the parish, and handy to keep off all interruptions and annoyances; and a son who had gone away and abandoned her at the first chance—disappointed all her hopes, left her alone, doubly alone, in the world. “It is her hour for the school, the dearest little mother,” he said to himself, with the tears coming to his eyes;

“she never fails, though we all fail her ;” but even as the words formed in his mind he perceived that the room into which he was gazing was not empty. There she sat, thrown back into a chair ; her work was lying on the floor at her feet ; but John had never seen such an air of weariness and lassitude in his mother before. He recognised the gown she had on, the basket of work on the table, all the still life round her ; but her he could not recognise. She had her hands crossed loosely in her lap, laid together with a passive indifference that went to his heart. Could she be asleep ? but she was not asleep ; for after a while one of the hands went softly up to her cheek, and something was brushed off, which could only be a tear. He could scarcely restrain the cry that came to his lips ; but at that moment the door, which he could not see, must have opened, for she gave a start, and roused herself, and turned to speak to somebody. “I am coming, Lizzie,” John heard her answer in a spiritless, weary tone ; and then she rose and put away her work, and took up her white shawl, which was lying

on the back of a chair. She liked white and pretty bright colours about her, the simple soul. They became her, and were like herself. But when she had wrapped herself in the shawl, which was as familiar to John as her own face, his mother gave a long weary sigh, and sat down again as if she could not make up her mind to move. He had crept quite close to the window by this time, moved beyond expression by the sight of her, with tears in his eyes, and unspeakable compunction in his heart. "What does it matter now?" she said to herself, drearily. She had come to be so much alone that the thought was spoken and not merely thought. When John stepped into the room a moment after, his mother stood and gazed at him as if he had risen out of the earth, and then gave a great cry which rang through all the house, and fell upon his neck. Fell upon his neck—that was the expression—reaching her arms, little woman as she was, up to him as he towered over her; and would not have cared if she had died then, in the passion of her joy.



“Mother, dear, you are trembling,” John said, as he put her tenderly into her chair and knelt down beside her, taking her hands into his. “I should not have been so foolish startling you; but I could not resist the temptation when I saw you here.”

“Joy does not hurt,” said Mrs Mitford. “I have grown so silly, my dear, now I have not you to keep me right; and it was a surprise. There—I don’t in the least mean to cry; it is only foolishness. And oh, my poor John, your arm!”

“It is nothing,” he said; “it is almost well. Never mind it. I am a dreadful guy, to be sure. Is that what you are looking at, mamma mia?” In his wan face and fire-scorched hair she had not known her child.

“Oh, John, that you could think so,” she said, in her earnest matter-of-fact way. “My own boy! as if I should not have known you anywhere, whatever you had done to yourself. It was not that. John, my dear?”

“What, mother?”

“I was looking to see if you were happy, my dearest, dearest boy. Don’t be angry with

me. As long as you are happy I don't mind—what happens—to me.”

John laid his head down on his mother's lap. How often he had done it!—as a child, as a lad, as a man—sometimes after those soft reproofs which were like caresses—sometimes in penitence, when he had been rebellious even to her; but never before as now, that her eyes might not read his heart. He did it by instinct, having no time to think; but in the moment that followed thought came, and he saw that he must put a brave face on it, and not betray himself. So he raised his head again, and met her eyes with a smile, believing, man as he was, that he could cheat her with that simulation of gladness which went no further than his lips.

“What could I be but happy?” he said; “but not to see you looking so pale, and trembling like this, my pretty mamma. You are too pretty to-day—too pink and too white and too bright-eyed. What do you mean by it? It must be put a stop to, now I have come home.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, with

tremulous eagerness. . He was not happy ; he might deceive all the world, she said to herself, but he could not deceive his mother. He was not happy, but he did not mean her to know it, and she would not betray her knowledge. So she only trembled a little more, and smiled pathetically upon him, and kissed his forehead, and shed back the hair from it with her soft nervous hands. "Coming home has such a sound to me. It used to mean the long nice holidays ; and once I thought it meant something more ; but now——"

"Now it means a week or two," he said ; "not much, but still we can make a great deal out of it. And the first thing must be to look after your health, mother. This will never do."

"My health will mend now," she said, with a smile ; and then, afraid to have been supposed to consent to the fact that her health had need of mending—"I mean I never was better, John. I am only a little—nervous—because of the surprise ; the first thing is to make you enjoy your holiday, my own boy."

"Yes," he said, with a curious smile. Enjoy

his holiday!—which was the escape of a man beaten from the field on which he had failed in his first encounter with fate. But I will not let her know that, John said to himself. And I must not show him that I see it, was the reflection of his mother. This was how they met again after the great parting which looked like the crisis of their lives.

## CHAPTER XX.

KATE was very much perplexed by her interview with her lover, and by the abrupt conclusion of his visit. She was very sweet-tempered and good-natured, and could not bear to vex any one; but perhaps it pained her secretly a little to be brought in contact with those very strong feelings which she scarcely understood, and which did not bear much resemblance to her own tender, affectionate, caressing love. She was very fond of John; at bottom she knew and felt that of all the men she had ever seen, he was the man whom she preferred trusting her life and happiness to; and when opportunity served she was very willing to give him her smiles, her sweet words, to lean her head against him, caressing and dependent, to bestow even

a soft unimpassioned kiss ; but to think of nothing but John, to resign any part of her duties as mistress of the house, or to neglect other people, and make them uncomfortable, on account of him, would never have occurred to her, and there was in her mind at the same time something of that fatal curiosity which so often attends power. She wanted to know how far her power could go : it gave her a thrill of excitement to speculate upon just touching the utmost borders of it, coming to the verge of loss and despair, and then mending everything with a touch of her hand or sudden smile. By nature Kate seemed to have been so completely separated from all tragical possibilities. She had never wanted anything in all her life that had not been procured for her. Everything had given way to her, everything conspired to give her her will. And what if she should give herself one supreme pleasure to end with, and skirt the very edge of the abyss, and feel the awful thrill of danger, and go just within a hair's-breadth of destruction ? Kate's heart beat as the thought occurred to her. If she could do

this, then she might sip the very essence of tragedy, and never more be obliged to despise herself as ignorant of intense emotions—while yet she would still keep her own happiness all the time to fall back upon. Such was the thought—we cannot call it project—which gradually shaped itself in Kate's mind, and which accident went so far to carry out.

“So he has gone,” her father said to her; “we have not paid our deliverer sufficient attention, I suppose.”

“Papa, you know I will not have him talked of so,” cried Kate; “he went away because he chose to go. I am dreadfully sorry; and it makes me think a great deal less of the people who are staying here, not of John.”

“How do you make that out?” said her father.

“Because they did not understand him better,” said Kate, with flashing eyes; “they took their cue from you, papa—not from me—which shows what they are; for of course it is the lady of the house who has to be followed, not the gentleman. And he did not see anything of me, which was what he came

for. I only wonder that he should have stayed a single day."

"That is complimentary to us," said her father; and then he looked her keenly in the face. "It is not much use trying to deceive me," he said. "You have quarrelled with Mitford; why don't you tell me so at once? You have no reproach to expect from me."

"I have not quarrelled with Mr Mitford," said Kate, raising her head with an amount of indignation for which Mr Crediton was not prepared.

"No, by Jove! you need not expect any reproaches from me; a good riddance, I should be disposed to say. The fellow begins to get intolerable. Between you and me, Kate, I would almost rather the Bank had been burnt to the ground than owe all this to a man I——"

"Papa," said Kate, loftily, "the man you are speaking of is engaged to be married to me."

Upon which Mr Crediton laughed. Such a cynical Mephistophelian laugh was not in his way, neither was it usual with him to swear



by Jove ; but he was aggravated, and his mind was twisted quite out of its general strain. No doubt it is very hard to have favours heaped upon you by a man whom you do not like. And then he had the feeling which embittered his dislike, that for every good service John had done him, he had repaid him with harm. As a recompense for his daughter's life, he had placed her lover in the dingy outer office—a clerk with more pretensions and less prospect of success than any of the rest. As a reward for the devotion which had saved him his property, he made his house, if not disagreeable, at least unattractive to his visitor, and now felt a certain vigorous satisfaction in the thought of having beaten him off the field. “That fellow !” he said, and flattered himself that Kate too was getting tired of him. John had not even taken his preferment gratefully and humbly, as would have been natural ; but insisted upon taking possession of Kate whenever he could monopolise her society, and looked as black as night when she was not at his call. Instead of being overjoyed with the prospect of going to Fernwood at any price,

he had the assurance to resent his cool reception and to cut short his visit, as if he were on an equal or even superior footing. Mr Crediton was very glad to get rid of him, but yet he was furious at his presumption in venturing to take it upon himself to go away. It was a curious position altogether. He dared not be rude to the man who had done so much for him ; everybody would have called shame on him had he attempted it ; and yet he began to hate him for his services. And at the same time he had the substantial foundation of justice to rest upon, that in point of fact John Mitford was not a suitable match for Kate Crediton. It was in this mood that he accosted Kate, almost expecting to find her disposed to respond in his own vein.

“There is many a slip between the cup and the lip,” he said oracularly, and left her standing where he had found her, almost diverted from her own thoughts by indignation and that healthful impulse of opposition which springs so naturally in the young human breast. “There shall be no slips in John’s cup,” she said to herself, with a certain fury, as she

turned away, not thinking much of the unity of the metaphor. No, nothing should interfere with John's happiness ; at least nothing should permanently interfere with it. The course of true love should certainly be made to run smooth for him, and everything should go right—at the last. That, of course, was all that was necessary—the most severe critic could not demand more than a happy conclusion. “ Papa is very, very much mistaken if he thinks he can make me a traitor to John,” Kate said within herself, indignantly, and hurried off to put on her habit, and went out to ride with a countenance severe in conscious virtue. She was pleased that it was Fred Huntley who kept most closely by her side all the way. For one thing, he rode very well, which is always a recommendation ; and then she felt that she could speak to him of the subject which was most in her thoughts. It was true that she had almost quarrelled with her lover on Fred's account, and that there had been a moment when her mind was full of the thought that her choice must lie between the two. But Kate forgot these warnings in the

impulse of the moment, and in her longing for confidential communion with somebody who was interested in John.

"Papa has been making himself so disagreeable to-day," she said. "No, I know I have not much to complain of in that way; generally he is very good; but this morning—though perhaps I ought not to say anything about it," Kate concluded with a sigh.

"It is a way our fathers have," said Fred, "though they ought to know better at their time of life; but Mr Crediton is a model in his way—small blame to him when he has only to deal with——"

"Me," said Kate; "please don't pay me any compliments; we don't really like them, you know, though we have to pretend to. I know I am sometimes very aggravating; but if there is any good in a girl at all, she must stand up for anybody who—who is fond of her: don't you think so, Mr Huntley? What could any one think of her if she had not the heart to do that?"

"I am afraid I don't quite follow your meaning," said Fred; "to stand up for everybody

who is fond of her? but in that case your life would be a series of standings-up for somebody or other—and one might have too much of that.”

“There you go again,” said Kate; “another compliment! when that is not in the least what I want. I want backing up myself. I want—advice.”

“Indeed, indeed,” said Fred—“I am quite ready to give any quantity of backing up—on the terms you have just mentioned; or—advice.”

“Well,” said Kate, with a certain softness in her tone—she could not help being slightly caressing to anybody she talked confidentially with—“you know we have been friends almost all our lives; at least I was a very small little girl when I first knew you; we used to call you Fred in those days—Minnie and Lizzie and I——”

“Minnie and Lizzie call me Fred still,” said her companion, dryly; and he brought his horse very close, almost too close, to her side.

“Of course, they are your sisters,” said Kate; “but that was not what I meant. I meant

that it was natural I should talk to you. I have not got any brother to advise me, and papa has been so disagreeable; and then, besides knowing me so well, you are quite intimate—with—poor John.”

“Do you know,” said Fred, with apparent hesitation, “I meant to have spoken to you on that subject. I fear Mitford does not like it. I don’t blame him. If I had been as fortunate as he is—pardon the supposition—I don’t think I should have liked you—I mean the lady—to talk to any other man of me.”

Kate did not answer for some minutes. She went along very slowly, her head and her horse’s drooping in harmony; and then she suddenly roused herself as they came to a level stretch of turf, and with a little wave of her hand went off at full speed. Such abrupt changes were familiar to all her friends, but Fred had a feeling that the caprice for once was policy, and that she wanted time to recover herself, and make up her mind what kind of answer she should give. Perhaps she had another notion too, and had half hoped to shake off her attendant, and pick up some one

else who would not tempt her into paths so difficult. However that might be, the fact was that she did not shake Fred off, but found him at her side when she drew rein and breath a good way ahead of the rest of the party.

"That was sudden," he said, with a smile, stopping as she did, and timing all his movements to hers with a deference that half flattered, half annoyed her. And Kate was silent again. Her spirit failed at this emergency—or else, which was more likely, she had not made up her mind that it was an emergency, or that now was the moment when any decision must be made.

"I don't understand why you should feel like that," she said, all at once. "It is natural to talk about people one—cares for; and who should one talk of them to but their friends? I told you papa had been dreadfully disagreeable all this time—to *him*; I am sure I can't think why—unless it is to make me unhappy; and I am unhappy whenever I think of it," Kate added, with a candour of which she herself was unaware.

"I think I can understand quite well why,"

said Fred. "It is natural enough. I daresay he hates every fellow that ventures to look at you; and as for a man who hopes to take you from him altogether—I don't see how the best of Christians could be expected to stand that."

"Oh, nonsense," said Kate. "All the books say that our fathers and mothers are only too glad to get rid of us. I don't think, however, it would be true to say that of papa. He would be very lonely. But in that case, don't you think the thing would be to make very good friends with—poor John?"

Fred shook his head with every appearance of profound gravity and deliberation. "I do not think my virtue would be equal to such an exertion," he said, with great seriousness, "if I were your papa."

"You are very absurd," said Kate, laughing; "as if you could be my papa! Yes, indeed, it is easy to laugh; but if you had as much on your mind as I have, Mr Huntley——"

"You said you used to call me Fred."

"That was only with your sisters," said Kate. "We are too old for that now; and,



besides, if you were my real friend, and felt for me, you would not talk nonsense when I tell you how much I have on my mind."

"Am I talking nonsense?" said Fred; and just then, as ill luck would have it, their companions overtook them and interrupted the conversation, just, Kate said to herself, as it began to be interesting. And she had not really been able to obtain any advice from this old friend of her own and of John's, who was, she reflected, of all people the right one to consult. John had been impatient about it, but of course it was simply because John did not know. *He* thought Fred was intruding between them, attempting to take his own place, which was, oh, such folly! Fred of all men! who never even *looks* at me! said Kate. And then her conscience smote her a little, for Fred had surely looked at her, even this very day, more perhaps than John would have approved of. However, he was perfectly innocent, he was a man who never had been fond of any girl—who was a fellow of a college, and that sort of thing: and it was natural that she should want to talk over the circum-

stances and discuss the matter with somebody. Though she would not really have vexed John for the world, yet somehow his unreasonable dislike to Fred rather stimulated than prevented her from seeking Fred's advice. Why should she give in to an injustice? And surely in such a matter it was she who must know best.

As for Fred Huntley, there was a curious combat going on within him which he concealed skilfully from everybody, and even laboriously from himself. He pretended not to be aware of the little internal controversy. When his heart gave him a little tug and intimation that he was John Mitford's friend, and ought to guard his interests, he acquiesced without allowing that any question on the matter was possible. Of course he was John's friend—of course he would stand by him; and he only saw with the tail of his eye, and took no notice of, the little imp which in a corner of his mind was gibing at this conscientious resolution. And then he said to himself how pretty Kate Crediton looked to-day, when she suddenly woke out of her reverie, and gathered up her

reins and went off like a wild creature, her horse and she one being, over the level turf. He could not but allow it was very odd that he had never remarked it before. He supposed she must have been as pretty all these years, when he had seen her growing from summer to summer into fuller bloom. But the fact was that he had never taken any notice of her until now; and he did not know how to explain it. While the thought passed through his mind, it appeared to Fred as if the little demon, whom he could just perceive with the tail of the eye of his mind, so to speak, made a grimace at him, as much as to say, I know the reason why. Impertinent little imp! Fred turned and looked himself full in the face, as it were, and there was no demon visible. It was only to be seen with the tail of his eye, when his immediate attention was fixed on other things.

And thus the day passed on at Fernwood, with the ride and the talk; and at night the great dinner, which was like a picture, with its heaps of flowers on the table, and pretty toilettes and pretty faces round it—a long day for those who had no particular interest, and a

short day for those who were better occupied. Lady Winton, who had known Mrs Mitford when she was a girl, yawned over her dressing, and told her confidential maid drearily that she could not think why she had come, and wished she might go, except that the next place would be just as bad. But Fred felt in his calm veins a little thrill of excitement, as of a man setting forth in an unknown country, and found Fernwood much more interesting than he had ever done before. "They have always such nice people—Lady Winton for one," he said to the man who sat next him after dinner; for Lady Winton was a very clever woman, and rather noted in society. Such was the fashion of life at Fernwood, when John sat down in the shadow of his mother's lamp at Fanshawe Regis, and did his best to make the evening cheerful for her, for the first time for three months.

## CHAPTER XXI.

THE conversation above recorded was, it may be supposed, very far from being the last on so tempting a subject. In short, the two who had such a topic to themselves did with it what two people invariably do with a private occasion for talk,—produced it perpetually, had little snatches of discussion over it, which were broken off as soon as any stranger appeared, and gradually got into a confidential and mysterious intimacy. Kate, to do her justice, had no evil intention. None of the girls about her knew John sufficiently well to discuss him. They had seen him but for these two days, when he had been *distract*, preoccupied, and suffering ; and indeed her friends did not admire her choice, and Madeline Winton, who was her chief intimate, had not hesitated to say

so. "Of course I don't doubt Mr Mitford is very nice," had been Miss Winton's deliverance ; "but if you really ask my *opinion*, Kate, I must say he did not captivate me." "I did not want him to captivate you," Kate had answered, with some heat. But nevertheless it is discouraging to have your confidences about your betrothed thus summarily checked. And on the whole, perhaps, it was more piquant to have Fred Huntley for a confidant than Madeline Winton. He never snubbed her. To be sure, with him it was not possible to indulge in very much enthusiasm over the excellences of the beloved ; but that was not in any case Kate's way ; and the matter, without doubt, was full of difficulties. It was hard to know how to overcome Mr Crediton's passive but unfaltering resistance—how to bring the father and the lover to something like an understanding of each other—how to satisfy John and smooth down his asperities and make him content with his position. "It is not that he is discontented," Kate said, with an anxious pucker on her brow, on one of those evenings when she had stolen a moment from her cares

and her guests. "It is not that he is discontented," she repeated; "I hope he is too fond of me for that—but——"

"I don't understand how such a word as discontent could be spoken in the same breath with his name," said Fred—"a lucky fellow! No, surely it cannot be that."

"I told you it was not discontent," Kate said, almost sharply; "and as for lucky and all that, you always make me angry with your nonsense—when we are talking gravely of a subject which is of so much importance; at least it is of great importance to me."

"I think you might know by this time," said Fred, with soft reproach, "that everything that concerns you is important to me."

She looked up at him with that soft glow of gratitude and thanks in her eyes which had subdued John, and half extended to him the tips of her fingers. "Yes, indeed," she said, "you are very, very kind. I don't know why I talk to you like this. I can't talk so to anybody else. And I do so want some one to feel for me. Is it very selfish? I am afraid it is."

"If it is selfish, I hope you will always be

selfish," said Fred, with a fervour which was out of place, considering all things, and yet was natural enough ; and though he could not kiss the finger-tips with so many eyes looking on, he squeezed them furtively in the shadow of her dress. And then for one moment they looked at each other and felt they were going wrong. To Fred, I am afraid, the feeling was not new, nor so painful as it ought to have been ; but it sent the blood pulsing suddenly with a curious thrill up to Kate's very hair, startling her as if she had received an electric shock. And then next moment she said to herself, "Nonsense ! it is only Fred ; he is fond of me as if he were my brother. And how nice it would be to have a brother !" she added unconsciously, with a half-uttered sigh.

"Did you speak ?" said Fred.

"No ; I was only thinking how nice it would be—if you were my real brother," said Kate. "How I wish you were my brother ! You have always been so kind ; and then you would settle it all for me, and everything would come right. It would have been so nice for papa too to have had a son like you. He



would not have minded losing me so much ; and he would have been so proud of your first class and all that. What a nice arrangement it would have been altogether !” she ran on, beginning to see a little fun in the suggestion, which even in her present anxious state was sweet to her. “ I wonder, you know—I don’t mean to be wicked, but I do wonder—why Providence shouldn’t think of such things. It would have been so very, very nice both for me and for papa !”

To this Fred made no reply : he even looked a little glum, if the truth must be told, and wondered, after all, was she laughing at him as well as at the rest of the world ? and the general company, as it happened, wanted a little stirring up just at that particular moment, and Kate had darted off before he was aware, and was here and there among her guests looking as if vexation of any kind had never come near her. Fred asked himself, did she mean what she said—was she really moved by the difficulties that lay in John Mitford’s way, or did she care anything about John Mitford ? and what was still more important, what did she

mean about himself?—did she mean anything?—was she playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse? or was it all real for the moment—her anxieties, her friendship, all her winning ways?—for they were winning ways, though he did not feel sure what faith was to be put in them; and Fred felt a certain pleasant weakness about his heart at the very thought of her—though she was not his but another man's Kate, and though he had no desire to be her brother. There were various men within reach with whom he could have talked pleasantly enough in other circumstances; and there were women whom he liked—Lady Winton, for instance—who was very clever, and a great friend of Fred's. Yet instead of consoling himself with any of these resources, he sat in his corner, going over and over the foolish little conversation which had just passed, watching Kate's movements, and wondering if she would come back. The time was—and that not so very long ago—when he would have thought Lady Winton's company worth twenty of Kate Crediton's; though Lady Winton was as old as his mother, and as

free from any thought of flirting with her son's friend. But something had suddenly made the very idea of Kate Crediton much more captivating than her ladyship's wit and wisdom. What was it? Is it quite fair to Mitford? Fred even asked himself faintly, though he gave himself no answer. At the last, however, his patience was rewarded. Kate came back after a long interval, after she had suggested "a little music," and had herself sung, and successfully started the performances of the evening. She came back to Fred, as she had never gone back to John,—partly, perhaps, because Fred was not much to her, and John was a great deal. But nevertheless, she slid into the easy-chair again, and threw herself back, and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the music. "This is so sweet. Please don't talk to me—any one," she said, audibly. And Fred did not talk; but he sat half behind her, half concealed by her chair and dress, and felt a curious beatitude steal over him. Why? He could not tell, and he did not ask;—he felt it, that was all.

"Do you know," Kate said, with a certain

abruptness, in the middle of a bar, "that I think everything might come right, Mr Huntley, if you would really use your influence; if you would represent to papa how good he is; and if you would only be patient with *him*, and show him how much better things might be. You men are so queer. If it were me, I would put on any look, it would not matter. Could there be anything wrong in putting on a look just for a little while, when it might conciliate papa? Any girl would do it naturally," Kate continued, in a slightly aggrieved tone. "I know you men are honester, and superior, and all that; but when one has not a bad motive, it can't be any harm to make-believe a little, for so short a time."

"I think I could make-believe as much and as long as you liked," said Fred, "if you would condescend to ask me."

"Everybody does it—a little—in ordinary society," said Kate. "Of course we all smile and say things we don't mean. And wouldn't it be all the more innocent if one had a good motive? You men are so stiff and so strange.

You can put on looks easily enough when it is for your own ends; and then, when one wants you just to be a little prudent——”

“Happy Mitford!” said Fred. “I should stand on my head, if you took the trouble to ask me.”

“That is not the question,” said Kate, giving her pretty head a little toss, as if to shake off the suspicion of a blush which had come against her will; “why should I ask you to stand on your head? Now you are vexed,” she added, hastily, seeing his face cloud over. “What have I done? I am sure I did not mean to vex you. I was only thinking of——poor John.”

Fred was silent. He had almost betrayed himself, and it was hard to make any reply. He swallowed his vexation as he best could, and represented to himself that he had no right to be vexed. Of course it was John she was thinking of. That fellow! he said to himself, as Mr Crediton had done; though even in saying so he was aware that he was unjust. And, to be sure, he had known that John was more interesting to Kate than he

was; yet he felt it hard. He drew back a little, and bit his lip, and twisted his thumbs, and looked black in spite of himself.

“Don’t, please!” said Kate, carried away by her desire of smoothing things down and making everybody comfortable. “I have nearly quarrelled with papa. Don’t you quarrel with me too.”

“I quarrel with you!” cried Fred, leaning forward once more, and gazing at her with eyes that made Kate quake; and then he paused and added, in restrained tones that had a thrill of passion in them, “Do anything with me you like. I will try not to shrink from anything you want me to do. But Kate, Kate, don’t forget I am a man—as well as John.”

It was a great relief to Kate that Lady Winton came up at that moment and took a seat near her, and put an effectual stop to any more whispering. Perhaps it would be nonsense to say that she was very much surprised by this little outbreak of feeling. It is common to admire and wonder at the unfathomableness of women; and, like most other common and popular ideas, it is great

nonsense ; for women are no more mysterious to men than men are to women, and both are equally incomprehensible. But perhaps the sentiments of a young woman in respect to the man who pays court to her, are really as curious things as are to be found within the range of humanity. The girl has no intention to be cruel—is no coquette—and would be astonished beyond measure if she could fully realise what she is herself doing. And yet there is a curiosity, an interest, in admiration for itself—in love (still more) for itself—which draw her on unawares. It requires a strong mind, or an insensible heart, not to be interested in such an investigation, and sometimes it goes to the point of cruelty. When she knows what she is about, of course a good girl will stop short, and do what she can to show the infatuated one “some discourtesy,” as Sir Lancelot was bidden do to Elaine; but there are some women, like Lancelot, who cannot be discourteous, whatever is the cost; and with a mixture of awe, and wonder, and poignant gratification which is half pain, the woman looks on while that

costly offering is made to her. It is cruel, and yet it is not meant to be cruel. Such were Kate's feelings now. Was it possible that Fred Huntley could be coming to the point of loving her—the collected, cool, composed being that he was? What kind of love would his be? How would it move him? Would it be true love, or only a pretence at it? These questions filled her with a curiosity and desire to carry on the experiment, which were too strong to be resisted. She was glad of Lady Winton's approach, because when it comes to plain speaking, it is difficult to pursue this subtle inquiry without compromising one's self. But she turned half round and gave him a wondering, anxious look. You poor dear fellow! what can you mean? was what the look said; and it was not the kind of glance which discourages a lover either secret or avowed. And then she turned to Lady Winton, who had established herself at Kate's other side.

“I have scarcely seen you all day,” she said. “Madeline told me you were too tired to talk, and that it was best to leave you alone.”



"That was very true," said Lady Winton, "but I am better now, and I have something to say to you before I go away. Mr Huntley, will you fetch me my fan, which I have left on the piano? Thanks. Now we have got rid of him, my dear, I can say what I have to say."

"But probably he will come back," said Kate, with a thrill of fear.

"I don't think he will. Fred Huntley has a great deal of sense. When I send him off with a commission like that, of course he knows we don't want him here; and I am so glad he is gone, Kate, for it was to speak of him I came."

"To speak of—him!"

"Yes, indeed," said Lady Winton. "Tell me frankly, Kate, as one woman to another, which is it to be?"

"Which is what to be?—I don't understand you," said Kate, flushing crimson; "which of which? Lady Winton, I can't even guess what you mean."

"Oh yes, you can," said her new adviser. "My dear, it is not permitted by our laws to have two husbands, and that makes two lovers

very dangerous—I always warn a girl against it. You think, perhaps, there is no harm, and that one of them will be wise enough not to go too far; but they will go too far, those silly men—and when they don't, we despise them, my dear," said the experienced woman. "A woman may shilly-shally, and hold off and on, and make an entertainment of it—but when a man is capable of that sort of thing he is not worth a thought; and so I ask, which is it to be?"

It will be seen from this that Lady Winton, like so many clever women of her age, was deeply learned in all the questions that arise between men and women. She had studied the matter at first hand of course, in her youth; and though she had never been a flirt, she had not been absolutely devoid of opportunity for study, even in her maturer years, when the faculty of observation was enlarged, and ripe judgment had come; and accordingly she spoke with authority, as one fully competent to fathom and realise the question which she thus fearlessly opened. As for Kate, she changed colour a great many times while

she was being addressed, but her courage did not fail.

"Mr Huntley is my friend," she said, facing her accuser bravely : "as for which it is to be, I introduced Mr Mitford to you, Lady Winton——"

"Yes, my dear, and that is what makes me ask ; and a very nice young fellow, I am sure—a genuine reliable sort of young man, Kate——"

"Oh, isn't he?" cried that changeable personage, with eyes glowing and sparkling ; "dear Lady Winton, you always understand—that is just what he is—one could trust him with anything and he would never fail."

"You strange girl," said Lady Winton, "what do you mean? Why, you are *in earnest*! and yet you sit and talk with Fred Huntley a whole evening in a corner, and do everything you can to break the other poor fellow's heart."

"The other poor fellow is not here," said Kate, with a half-alarmed glance round her. If it came to that, she felt that after all she would not have liked John to have watched

her interview with her friend and his : and then she perceived that she had betrayed herself, and coloured high, recollecting that she was under keen feminine inspection which missed nothing.

“Don’t trust to that,” said Lady Winton ; “you may be sure there is somebody here who will let him know. I don’t say much about Fred Huntley’s heart, for he is very well able to take care of that ; but, Kate, for heaven’s sake, mind what you are about ! Don’t get into the habit of encouraging one man because another is absent and will not know. Everybody knows everything, my dear ; there is no such thing as a secret ; you forget there are more than a dozen pairs of eyes in this very room.”

“Lady Winton,” said Kate, “I am not afraid of any one seeing what I do. I hope I have not done anything wrong ; and as for Mr Mitford, I know him and he knows me.”

“Well, well — let us hope so,” said Lady Winton, with a prolonged shake of her head ; “and I hope he is more philosophical than I gave him credit for ; I should not have said it

was his strong point. But, however, as you are so very sure, my dear——”

“Perfectly sure,” said Kate, with dignity ; and the moment she had said it, would have liked to throw her arms round her monitor’s neck and have a good cry ; but that was quite impossible in the circumstances ; and Fred Huntley from afar seeing the two ladies draw imperceptibly apart, and seeing their conversation had come to an end, approached with the fan, and took up his position in front of them, and managed to bring about a general conversation. He did it very skilfully, and contrived to cover Kate’s annoyance and smooth her down, and restore her to self-command ; and that night Kate was not only friendly but grateful to him, which was a further step in the downward way.

## CHAPTER XXII.

FRED HUNTLEY was a man of considerable ingenuity as well as coolness of intellect; and it was impossible that he could remain long unconscious of what he was doing, or take any but the first steps in any path without a clear perception of whither it led. And accordingly, before he had reached this point he had become fully aware of the situation, and had contemplated it from every possible point of view. No feeling of treachery to John weighed upon him when he thought it fully over. He had not been confided in by Kate's accepted lover, nor appealed to, nor put upon his honour in the matter; and John was not even a very intimate friend that he should give in to him; nor did it occur to him to stifle the dawning love in his own heart, and withdraw

from the field, even for Kate's sake, to leave her tranquil to the enjoyment of her first love. Such an idea was not in Fred's way. To secure his own will and his own happiness was naturally the first thing in his estimation, and he had no compunctions about his rival. There seemed to him no possible reason why he should sacrifice himself, and leave the field clear to John. And then there were so many aspects in which to consider the matter. It would be much better for her, Fred felt, to marry himself. He could make appropriate settlements upon her ; he could maintain her in that position to which she had been accustomed ; he could give her everything that a rich man's daughter or rich man's wife could desire. His blood, perhaps, might not be so good as John Mitford's blood, if you entered into so fine a question ; but he was heir to his father's money, if not to much that was more ethereal. And money tells with everybody, Fred thought ; it would tell with Kate, though perhaps she did not think so. Of all people in the world was not she the last who could consent to come down from her luxuri-

ous state, and be the wife of a poor man, with next to no servants, no horses, no carriage, and nothing but love to make up to her for a thousand wants? Fred Huntley was in love himself, and indeed it was love that was the origin of all these deliberations; and yet he scoffed at love as a compensation. By dint of reasoning, he even got himself to believe that it was an unprincipled thing on John's part to seek her at all, and that any man would do a good deed who should deliver her from his hands. He had reached to this point by the next evening after the one whose events we have just recorded. Kate had not ridden out that day; she had been little visible to any one, and Fred had not more than a distant glimpse of her at the breakfast-table and in the twilight over the tea, which called together most of the party. Madeline Winton and her mother had gone away that morning; and Madeline was Kate's gossip, her confidential friend, the only one with whom she could relieve her soul. She was somewhat low-spirited in the evening. Fred looked on, and saw her languid treatment of everything, and



the snubs she administered to several would-be consolers. He kept apart with conscious skill; and yet, when he happened to be thrown absolutely in her way, was very full of attention and care for her comfort. He placed her seat just as he thought she liked it, arranged her footstool for her with the most anxious devotion, and was just retiring behind her chair when she stopped him, struck by his melancholy looks. "Are you ill, Mr Huntley?" she said, with something like solicitude; and Fred shook his head, fixing his eyes on her face.

"No," he said, "I am not ill;" and then drew a little apart, and looked down upon her with a certain pathos in his eyes.

"There is something the matter with you," said Kate.

"Well, perhaps there is; and I should have said there was something the matter with you, Miss Crediton, which is of a great deal more importance."

"Mine is easily explained," said Kate; "I have lost my friend. I am always low when Madeline goes away. We have always been such

friends since we were babies. There is nobody in the world I am so intimate with. And it is so nice to have some one you can talk to and say everything that comes into your head. I am always out of spirits when she goes away."

"If the post is vacant I wish I might apply for it," Fred said, with exaggerated humility. "I think I should make an excellent confidant. Discreet and patient and ready to sympathise, and not at all given to offering impertinent advice."

"Ah, you!" cried Kate, with a sudden glance up at him. And then she laughed, notwithstanding her depressed condition. "I wonder what Lady Winton would say?" she added merrily, but the next moment grew very red and felt confused under his eye; for what if he should try to find out what Lady Winton had said?—which, of course, he immediately attempted to do.

"Lady Winton is a great friend of mine. She would never give her vote against me," said Fred, cunningly disarming his adversary.

Upon which Kate indulged herself in another mischievous laugh. Did he but know!

"She is not like you," said the girl in her temerity; "she is rather fond of giving advice."

"Yes," said Fred, growing bold. "That was what she was doing last night. Would you like me to tell you what it was about?"

"What it was about?" cried Kate, in consternation, with a violent sudden blush; but of course it must be nonsense, she represented to herself, looking at him with a certain anxiety. "You never could guess, Mr Huntley; it was something quite between ourselves."

"That is very possible," he said, so gravely that her fears were quite silenced; and he added in another moment, "but I know very well what it was. It was about me."

"About you!"

"I have known Lady Winton a great many years," said Fred, steadily. "I understand her ways. When she comes and takes a man's place and sends him off for something she has left behind on purpose, he must be dull indeed if he does not know what she means. She was talking to you of me."

"It was not I that said so!" cried Kate,

who was in a great turmoil, combined of fright, confusion, and amusement. It would be such fun to hear what guesses he would make, and he was so sure not to find it out! "When you assert such a thing you must prove it," she said, her eyes dancing with fun and rash delight, and yet with a secret terror in them too.

"She was warning you," said Fred, with a long-drawn breath, in which there was some real and a good deal of counterfeit excitement, "not to trifle with me. She was telling you, that though I did not show many signs of feeling, I was still a man like other men, and had a heart——"

"Fancy Lady Winton saying all that," cried Kate, with a tremulous laugh of agitation. "What a lively imagination you have—and about you!"

"But she might have said it with great justice," said Fred, very gravely and steadily, "and about me."

Here was a situation! To have a man speaking to you in your own drawing-room in full sight of a score of people, and as good as

telling you what men tell in all sorts of covert and secret places, with faltering voice and beating heart. Fred was perfectly steady and still; his voice was a trifle graver than usual—perhaps it might have been called sad; his eyes were fixed upon her with a serious, anxious look; there was no air of jest, no levity, but an aspect of fact which terrified and startled her. Kate fairly broke down under this strange and unexpected test. She gave a frightened glance at him, and put up her fan to hide her face. What was she to say?

“Please, Mr Huntley,” she faltered, “this is not the kind of subject to make jokes about.”

“Do I look like a man who is joking?” he asked. “I do not complain; I have not a word to say. I suppose I have brought it upon myself, buying the delight of your society at any price I could get it for—even the dearest. And you talk to me about another man as if I were made of stone—a man who——”

“Stop, please,” she said, faintly. “I may have been wrong. I never thought—but please don’t say anything of him, whatever you may say to me.”

“You are more afraid of a word breathed against him than of breaking my heart,” said Fred, with some real emotion; and Kate sat still, thunderstruck, taking shelter behind her fan, feeling that every one was looking at her, and that her very ears were burning and tingling. Was he making love to her? she asked herself. Had he any intention of contesting John’s supremacy? or was it a mere remonstrance, a complaint that meant nothing, an outcry of wounded pride and nothing more?

“Mr Huntley,” she said, softly, “if I have given you any pain, I am very sorry. I never meant it. You were so kind, I did not think I was doing wrong. Please forgive me; if there is any harm done it is not with my will.”

“Do you think that mends matters?” said Fred, with now a little indignation mingling in his sadness. “If you put it into plain English, this is what it means:—I was something so insignificant to you, taken up as you were with your own love, that it never occurred to you that I might suffer. You never thought of me at all. If you had said you had meant it, and had taken the trouble

to make me miserable, that would have been a little better; at least it would not have been contempt."

And he turned away from her and sat down at a little table near, and covered his face with his hand. What would everybody think? was Kate's first thought. Did he mean to hold her up to public notice, to demonstrate that she had used him badly? She bore it for a moment or two in her bewilderment, and then stretched across and touched him lightly with her fan. "Mr Huntley, there are a great many people in the room," she said. "If we were alone you might reproach me; but surely we need not let these people know — and papa! Mr Huntley, you know very well it was not contempt. Won't you forgive me — when I ask your pardon with all my heart?"

"Forgive you!" cried Fred; and he raised his head and turned to her, though he did not raise his eyes. "You cannot think it is forgiveness that is wanted — that is mockery."

"Please don't say so! I would not mock you for all the world. Oh, Mr Huntley, if it is not forgiveness, what is it?" cried Kate.

And then he looked at her with eyes full of reproach, and a certain appeal—while she met his look with incipient tears, with her child's gaze of wonder, and sorrow, and eloquent deprecation. "Please forgive me!" she said, in a whisper. She even advanced her hand to him by instinct, with a shy half-conscious movement, stopping short out of regard for the many pairs of eyes in the room, not for any other cause. "I am so very, very sorry," she said, and the water shone in her blue eyes like dew on flowers. Fred, though he was not emotional, was more deeply moved than he had yet been. Throughout all this strange interview, though he meant every word he said, he had yet been more or less playing a part. But now her ingenuous look overcame him. Something of the imbecility of tenderness came into his eyes. He made a little clutch at the finger-tips which had been held out to him, and would have kissed them before everybody, had not Kate given him a warning look, and blushed, and quickly drawn the half-offered hand away. She would not have drawn it away had they been alone. Would



she have heard him more patiently, given him a still kinder response? Fred could not tell, but yet he felt that his first effort had not been made in vain.

It was Mr Crediton himself who interrupted this *tête-à-tête*. He came up to them with a look which might have been mere curiosity, and might have been displeasure. "Kate," he said, gravely, "it seems to me you are neglecting your guests. Instead of staying in this favourite corner of yours, suppose you go and look after these young ladies a little. Mr Huntley will excuse you, I am sure."

"I am so lazy, I am out of spirits; and so is Mr Huntley; we have been condoling with each other," said Kate; but she got up as she spoke, with her usual sweet alacrity, not sorry, if truth were told, to escape. "Keep my seat for me, papa, till I come back," she said, with her soft little laugh. Mr Crediton did as he was told—he placed himself in her chair, and turned round to Fred and looked at him. While she tripped away to the other girls to resume her interrupted duties, her father and her new lover confronted each other,

and cautiously investigated what the new danger was.

“My dear Huntley,” said the elder man, “I am sure your meaning is the most friendly in the world; but my daughter is very young, and she is engaged to be married; and, on the whole, I think it would be better that you did not appropriate her so much. Kate ought to know better, but she is very light-hearted, and fond of being amused.”

“I don’t think I have been very amusing to-night,” said Fred. “Thanks, sir, for your frankness; but I am going away to-morrow, and I may claim a little indulgence, perhaps, for my last night.”

“Going away to-morrow!” said Mr Crediton, with surprise.

“Yes, I have no choice. Shall I say it is sudden business—a telegram from Oxford—a summons home? or shall I tell you the real reason, Mr Crediton?” cried Fred, with emotion. “You have always been very good to me.”

Mr Crediton was startled, notwithstanding his habitual composure. He looked keenly at

the young man, and saw what few people had ever seen—the signs of strong and highly-wrought feeling in Fred Huntley's face; and the sight was a great surprise to him. He had thought the two had been amusing themselves with a flirtation, a thing he did not approve of; but this must surely have gone beyond a flirtation. "If you have anything to say to me, come to the library after they have gone to bed," he said. Fred answered by a nod of assent, and the two separated without another word. Nor did Kate see the new claimant to her regard any more that night. He had disappeared when she had time to look round her, and recall the agitating interview which had broken the monotony of the evening. It came to her mind when she was talking, returning again and again amid the nothings of ordinary conversation. How strange it all was, how exciting! what a curious episode in the tedious evening! And what did he, what could he, mean? And what would John think? And was it possible that Fred Huntley could feel like that—Fred, that man of the world? She was confused,

bewildered, flattered, pleased, and sorry. It was a new sensation, and thrilled her through and through when she was rather in want of something to rouse her up a little. And she was so sorry for him ! She almost hoped he would spring up from some corner, and be chidden and comforted, and made more miserable by the soft look of compassion she would give him—the “ Pardon me ! ” which she meant to say ; but Fred made no further appearance, and the Pardon me ! was not said that night.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

IT puzzled Kate very much next morning to find that Huntley had not reappeared. It was not in the nature of things that she could avoid thinking about him, and wondering over and over again what he could mean,—whether he was mystifying her—but that was impossible ; or if it was really, actually true ? And the fact was that she went down-stairs a little earlier than usual, with a great curiosity in her mind as to how Fred would look, and whether she should see any traces in his face of last night's agitation. When she had taken this trouble, it may be supposed that it was hard upon her to find Fred absent ; and she “did not like”—a new expression in Kate's vocabulary—to ask what had become of him. She caught herself looking at the door

anxiously every time it opened, but he did not come. Some one at last relieved her anxiety by asking the point-blank question, "What has become of Huntley? has he gone away?" It was an idea which never had occurred to Kate. She looked up in blank dismay at the suggestion, and met her father's eye fully fixed upon her, and trembled, and felt that in two minutes more she must cry—not for Fred, but because he was decidedly an exciting new plaything, and he had gone away.

"Yes, he has gone away," said Mr Crediton, "this morning, before some of us were out of bed. I have his farewells to make. He did not know it would be necessary for him to go when he left us last night."

"I hope there is nothing the matter at Westbrook," said one of Fred's intimates; but Kate did not say a word. The room swam round her for one moment. Gone away! Was it so serious as that, then? The self-possessed Fred, had matters been so grave with him that flight was his only refuge? She was so startled that she did not know what to think. She

was sorry, and surprised, and fluttered, and excited, all in a breath. She did not pay any attention to the conversation for some minutes, though she was sufficiently mistress of herself to take the usual part in it, and to go on dispensing cups of tea. Gone away ! It was very fine, very honourable, very provoking of him. She had meant to bring him down to his level very kindly and skilfully, and cure him of all hopes, while still she kept him bound in a certain friendly chain. And now he had cut it all short, and taken the matter into his own hands. It cannot be denied that Kate was a little vexed at the moment. No doubt, if she had been left alone she would have got over it in the course of the day, and recovered her composure, and thought no more of Fred Huntley than she had done two days ago ; but she was not destined to be left to herself. The first thing that happened was that Mr Crediton remained in the breakfast-room till everybody was gone, and called her to him. The most indulgent of fathers was looking somewhat stern, which was a thing of itself which utterly puzzled as well as dismayed

the girl whom he had scarcely ever thwarted in the whole course of her life.

"Kate," he said, "you took no notice when I said Fred Huntley had gone away—so I suppose he told you why it was?"

"He never said a word to me of going away, papa," faltered Kate.

"But you know the cause? and I hope it will be a warning to you," said Mr Crediton. "I have seen this going on for some days, and I meant to have spoken to you. A girl in your position has no right to distinguish a man as you did poor Fred."

"But, dear papa," cried Kate, feeling very penitent yet very much flattered—as if somebody had paid her a very nice compliment, she said afterwards—"you cannot think it was my fault; I only talked to him like the rest. If I talked to him a little more, it was about—Mr Mitford. And he knew all the time. How was I to suppose it could come to any harm?"

"Don't let me hear of any other man being taken in by your confounded confidences—about Mr Mitford," said her father, with an



amount of rudeness and contemptuous impatience, such as perhaps had never been shown to Kate before in all her life.

“Papa!” she cried, indignant, drawing herself up; but Mr Crediton only said “Pshaw!” and went off and left her standing by herself, not knowing whether to cry or to be very angry, in the great empty room. He was wroth, and he was disposed rather to heighten than to subdue the expression of it. He wanted her to feel the full weight of his displeasure, rather a little more than less. For Fred Huntley would have suited him well enough for a son-in-law, if it was necessary to have such an article. He had distinguished himself already, and was likely still more to distinguish himself. He was thought of by the borough authorities as the new Member for Camelford. He was very well off, and could do everything that was right and meet in the way of providing for his bride. He was in her own sphere. “Confound that Mitford!” Mr Crediton said to himself as he left his daughter. It was bad enough to contemplate the possibility of ever resigning his child

to John's keeping; but to throw aside a man he liked for him, exaggerated the offence. He went out, kicking Kate's favourite Skye terrier on his way, as angry men are apt to do. "As if it was poor Muffy that had done it!" Kate said, with the tears springing to her eyes. When she was thus left she called her injured terrier to her, and hugged it, and had a good cry. "You did not do it, did you, Muffy?" she said. "Poor dear dog! what had you to do with it? If a man chooses to be silly, are we to be kicked for it, Muffy *mio*? Papa is a great bear, and everybody is as unkind as they can be; and oh, I am so sorry about poor Fred!"

She got over her crying, however, and her regrets, and made herself very agreeable to a great many people for the rest of the day, and petted Muffy very much, and took no notice of her father, who, poor man, had compunctions; but by the time that evening arrived, Kate began to feel that the loss of Fred was a very serious loss indeed. He had timed his departure very cleverly. If Madeline Winton had still been there, it might have been bear-

able ; for she would have had some one to open her heart to, notwithstanding that even to Madeline she had not been able to speak of John as she had indulged herself in doing to her "friend"—John's friend ; somehow that was not the title which she now thought of giving to Fred Huntley. He had suddenly sprung into individuality, and held a distinct place of his own in her mind. Poor Fred ! could it be possible that he was so fond of her ! he who was not at all a tragical sort of personage, or one likely to do anything very much out of the way for love. What could he find in her to be fond of ? Kate said to herself. He was not like John, who was ignorant of society. Fred Huntley had seen heaps of other girls who were very pretty and very nice ; and why was it that he had set his affections upon herself, Kate, whom he could not have ? It seemed such a pity, such a waste of effort. "Madeline might have had him, perhaps," she said to herself, reflecting pensively in her easy-chair with her fan at her lips to conceal their movement. Madeline as yet had no lover, and she was very nice, and

rather pretty too. And it would have been perfectly suitable, "instead of coming making a fuss over me ; and he can't have *me*," Kate added always within herself, with a sigh of suffering benevolence. It was hard he could not have her when he wanted her so very much. It was hard that everybody should not have everything they wanted. And it was odd, yet not unpleasant, that he should thus insist upon throwing away his love upon herself, who could not accept it, instead of giving it to Madeline, who might have accepted. How perverse the world was !

Thus Kate reflected as she sat and mused the evening after he had gone. She was heartily sorry to cross Fred, and felt the most affectionate sympathy for him, poor fellow ! It was so nice of him to be fond of her, though she could not give him any return. And if he had stayed and talked it over, instead of running away, Kate thought of a hundred things she could have said to him, as to the unreasonableness of falling in love with herself, and the good sense of transferring his love to Madeline. Somehow she did not quite expect

he would have taken her advice ; but still, no doubt, she would have set it before him in a very clear light, and got him to hear reason. And then he was very pleasant to talk to, and more amusing than anybody else at Fernwood. This feeling had never crept over her in respect to John. When he went away, she was sorry because he left her half in displeasure, and “ had not enjoyed himself ; ” but she could not persuade herself that she had missed his company, missed a hundred things he would have said to her, as she did now. She was in reality almost relieved to be quit of the passionate eyes which followed her everywhere, and the demand which he made upon her for her society, for her very inmost self. But Fred made no such claims. Fred took what he could get, and was happy in it. He spared her trouble, and watched to see what her wants were, and was always ready to talk to her or to leave her alone, as her mood varied. Poor Fred ! she sighed, feeling very, very sorry for him, with a half-tenderness of pity which young women accord only to those who are their personal victims. Perhaps she exag-

gerated his sufferings, as it was natural to do. She sat and mused over him all that evening with her fan half concealing her face. "My dear, I am afraid you have a headache," one of the elder ladies said to her; and Kate acquiesced with a faint little smile. "It is the weather," she said, softly; and the old lady, taking her cue, sat down beside her, and discussed the same. "The changes are the worst," she said—"the thermometer at sixty one day, and next day below the freezing-point. And then, in an English house, it is so difficult to keep cold out."

"I hope your room is warm," Kate said suddenly, remembering her hostess-ship. "You must tell me if you find it chilly. There is such a difference in some of the rooms!"

"It is according to their aspect," said the old lady; "mine is very comfortable, I assure you. It is you young ones that expose yourselves to so many changes. If I were you, I would wrap up very warm, and keep indoors for a day or two. There is nothing like keeping in an equitable temperature. I have no confidence in anything else."

"Thanks," Kate said, with a feeling of dreariness. Instead of Fred's conversation this was a poor exchange. And she grew more and more sorry for him, and more and more compassionate of herself as the evening stole on. Several of the people who interested her most had left within the last few days. There was but the moderate average of country-house visitors left; people who were not remarkable for anything—neither witty, nor pretty, nor particularly entertaining—and yet not to be complained of in any way. She did her duty to them as became Mr Crediton's daughter, and was very solicitous to know that they were comfortable and had what they liked; but she missed Madeline, she missed Lady Winton, she missed her acrid old godfather, who was said to be fond of nobody but Kate; and, above all, she missed Fred Huntley—poor Fred!

A week had passed, somewhat weakening this impression, when Fred returned, quite as suddenly as he went away. He was seen walking up the avenue when the party were at luncheon, and Kate's heart gave a little jump at

the sight of him. "Why, there is Huntley come back again!" some one cried, but he did not make his appearance at lunch; and it was only when he came into the drawing-room before dinner that Kate had any opportunity of seeing what change had been wrought in him by the discovery of his sentiments towards herself. Fred was playing a part; but, like every other actor in life who plays his part well, had come to believe in it himself, and to feel it real. He came up to her with a certain confused but melancholy frankness. "Miss Crediton," he said, "I am afraid you cannot like to see me, but I have come about business. I would not for the world, for any other reason, have brought what must be an annoyance upon you." And then Kate had lifted to him a pair of very sympathetic, almost tender, eyes.

"Indeed I don't know why I should not like to see you," she said, quietly. "You have always been very kind to me."

"Kind!" he had answered, turning away with a gesture of impatience, and not another word passed between them until the evening



was almost over, and all opportunity past. He was so slow, indeed, to take advantage of any opportunity, that Kate felt half angry—wondering had the man quite got over it? had he ever meant anything? But at the very last, when she turned her head unthinking, all at once she found his eyes upon her, and that he was standing close by her side.

“I suppose I must not ask for my old situation,” he said, softly. “I have been a fool and forfeited all my advantages because I could not win the greatest. You used to speak to me once—of the subject most interesting to yourself.”

“I don’t think it would be in the least interesting to you *now*, Mr Huntley,” said Kate, not without a little pique in her voice.

“Ah, you don’t know me,” he said. “I think I could interest myself in anything that was interesting to you.”

And then there was silence, in which Kate began to feel her heart beat, and wondered if this man could be an oyster, or if he could really be so inconceivably fond of her as to be thus concerned in all that concerned her hap-

piness. It sounded like something in a romance; and yet Kate knew enough of life and society to know that romance sometimes gave but a very colourless picture of the truth.

"I hope you have heard lately," he went on, with a voice which was elaborately and yet not unnaturally subdued—for, as has been said, Fred had fully entered into the *rôle* he was playing—"and that all is going well."

Kate blushed, perhaps, more violently than she had ever blushed in her life before. If he were making this sacrifice of his feelings for her, surely she ought to be true and sincere with him; but what she had to say was mortifying to her pride. She looked at him stooping over her, and tried to read his face, and asked herself, with a simplicity that is natural to the sophisticated, whether here, once for all, she had found *the* friend who is equal to utter self-abnegation, and of whom in books one sometimes reads. A more simple-minded girl, probably, would not have looked for so self-sacrificing a lover, but Kate had been brought up with a persuasion of her own

power to sway everybody to her will. "Mr Huntley," she said, hurriedly, "I don't think I ought to speak to you on such a subject; but, indeed, I feel anxious, and I don't know what to do."

"Then do speak to me," he said, bending over her. "Do you think I care what happens to myself if I can be of use to you?"

There are sentiments of this heroic description which we would see the fallacy of at once if addressed to others, which yet seem natural spoken to ourselves. And Kate had always been so important to everybody about her. She looked up at him again, she faltered, she half turned away, and then, after all, she spoke.

"I don't know why I should tell you. I don't know what it means. I have not heard a single word from him, Mr Huntley, since he went away."

A sudden gleam of light came into Fred's eyes, but he was looking down, and she only saw a ghost of it under his lowered eyelids. "That is very strange," he said.

"Do you think he can be ill? Do you

think anything can have happened?" asked Kate.

"He is not ill, he is at home at Fanshawe, and his burns are getting better. I saw him yesterday," said Fred.

"At home! and he never told me. Oh, how unkind it is! It used to be every other day, and now it is nearly a fortnight. But why should you care?" cried Kate, really moved with sharp mortification, and not quite aware what she said.

"I care a great deal," he said, very low, and sighed. And Kate's heart was sore, and she was angry, and wounded, and for almost the first time in her life felt that she had a little pride in her nature. Did the other despise her to whom she had given her heart? Did he think she was not worthy even of courtesy? though other people were so far from thinking so. Kate's impatient heart began to beat high with anger and with pain.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

THE first great apparent change in a life is not always its real beginning. It may be but the beginning of the beginning, as it were, the first grand crash of the ice, the opening of the fountain. There is more noise and more demonstration than when the full tide of waters begins to swell into the broader channel, but it is not the great crisis which it has the look of being. It is the commencement of a process of which it is impossible to predict the end. This had been emphatically the case with John Mitford when he was suddenly swept out of his father's house and out of all the traditions of his youth. It seemed to him and to everybody that his life had then taken its individual shape. When he returned to Fanshawe Regis, he went about with new eyes,

curiously observing everything which before he had accepted without observation. Was it that he felt the new better? Was it that he hankered after the old? These were questions which he could not answer. The only thing he was quite sure of in respect to himself was that he was uncertain about everything, and that life was no longer sweet enough to make up for the darkness and troubles in it. With this feeling in his mind he listened to his father's sermons, seeing everything in a different light, and went with his mother on her parish work, carrying her basket, gazing wistfully in at the cottage windows, wondering what was the good of it all. He had never questioned for a moment the good of at least his mother's ministrations until now. When she came smiling out of one of the cottages it cast a gloom upon her to find her boy, who had always been full of faith in her at least, standing unresponsive, waiting for her outside. She looked him in the eyes with her tender smile, and said, "Well, John?" as she gave back the little basket into his hand.

"Well," he said, with a sigh, "my good

little mother! do you think it is worth all the trouble you are taking, and all the trouble you have taken since ever I remember?—that is what I want to know.”

“Yes, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford, “that and a great deal more. Oh, John, if I could feel that but one, only one, was brought back to God by any means!”

“I think they are all very much the same as they used to be,” said John. “I recollect when I was a small boy, there was always something to be set right *there*.”

“That was the father, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford. “He was very troublesome. He took more than was good for him, you know; and then he used to be very unkind to his poor wife. Ah, John, some of these poor women have a great deal to bear!”

“But the blackguard is dead now, heaven be praised!” said John.

“Oh, hush, my dear, hush, and don’t speak of an immortal soul like that! Yes indeed, John, he has gone where he will be judged with clearer sight than ours. But I wish I could hope things were really mended,” said

Mrs Mitford, shaking her head. She went on shaking her head for a whole minute after she had stopped speaking, as if her hope was a very slight one indeed.

“What is the matter now?”

“The boys are very tiresome, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford, with a sigh. “Somehow it seems natural to them to take to bad ways. You can’t think how idle and lazy Jim is, though he used to be such a good boy when he was in the choir, don’t you remember? He looked a perfect little angel in his white surplice, but I fear he has been a very bad boy; and Willie and his mother never do get on together. He is the only one that can be depended upon in the least, and he talks of marrying and going away.”

“You have not much satisfaction out of them,” said John, “though I know you have always kept on doing all sorts of things for them. They ought at least to be grateful to you.”

“Well, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford, with anxious gravity, “I don’t like to blame her—but I am afraid sometimes their mother is not



very judicious, poor woman. It sours one sadly to have so much misfortune. She is always contradicting and crossing them for things that don't matter. I don't like to blame her, she has had so much to put up with; but still, you know—and of course it is discouraging, whatever one may try to say."

"And then there are the Littles," said John, leading his mother on.

"Oh, the Littles, dear! I wish you would not speak of them. Every month or so I think I have just got their mind up to the point of going to church. If you but knew the number of bonnets that woman has had, and shoes for the children, and even your papa's last old greatcoat which I got the tailor to alter for Robert. But it is never any good. And though I pay myself for the children's schooling, they never go. It is enough to break one's heart."

"And Lizzie's people are always a trouble to you," said John.

"Ah, my dear, but then the old woman is a Dissenter," said Mrs Mitford, with alacrity; "and in such a case what can one do?"

"But, mother dear, with all these things before you, does it sometimes strike you what a hopeless business it is?" cried John. "You have been working in the parish for twenty years——"

"Twenty-five, my dear boy—since before you were born."

"And what is it the better?" said John; "the same evils reappear just in the same way—the same wickedness, and profanity, and indifference. For all the change one can see, mother dear, all your work and fatigue might never have been."

"I must say so far as that goes I don't agree with you at all, John," cried his mother, with a certain sharp ring in her voice. The colour came to her cheeks and the water to her eyes. If it had been said to her that her life itself had been a mistake and failure, she could not have felt it more. Indeed the one implied the other; and if there was any one thing that she had built upon in all her modest existence, it was the difference in the parish. John's words gave her such a shock that she gasped after them with a sense of

partial suffocation. And then she did her best to restrain the momentary sharp thrill of resentment; for how could she be angry with her boy? "My dear," she said, humbly, with the tears in her soft eyes, "I don't suppose I have done half or quarter what I ought to have done; but still if you had seen the parish when we came—— If I had been a woman of more energy, and cleverer than I am——"

"You cannot think it was that I meant," cried John. "How you mistake me, mother! It is because your work has been so perfect, so unwearied—because it ought to have wrought miracles——"

"Oh, no, no, not that," she said, recovering her tranquillity, and smiling on her boy. "It has been very humble, my dear; but still, if you had seen the parish when we came—the alehouse was more frequented than the church a great deal—the children were not baptised—there were things going on I could not speak of even to you. That very Robert Little that we were speaking of—his father was the most inveterate poacher in the whole

country, always in prison or in trouble ; the eldest brother went for a soldier, and one of the girls—— Oh, John, Fanshawe Regis is not Paradise, but things are better now.”

“ My dear little mother ! but they are not as good as they ought to be after the work of all your life.”

“ Don’t speak of me, my dear boy, as if I were everything,” said Mrs Mitford ; “ think of your papa—and oh, John, think of what is far beyond any of us. Think whose life it was that was given, not for the righteous, but to save sinners ; think who it was that said there was joy in heaven over one that repented ; and should we grudge a whole lifetime if we could but be sure that one was saved ? I hope that is what I shall never, never, do.”

John drew his mother’s hand through his arm as she looked up in his face, with her soft features all quivering with emotion. What more could he say ? She was not clever, nor very able to take a philosophical view of the matter. She never stopped to ask herself, as he did, whether this faulty, shifty, mean,

unprofitable world was worth the expenditure of that divine life eighteen hundred years ago, and of the many lives since which have been half divine. All that;—and nothing better come of it than the vice, and the hypocrisy, and mercenary pretences at goodness, and brutal indifference to everything pure and true, which were to be found in this very village, in the depth of the rural country, in England that has been called Christian for all these hundreds of years. So much—and so little to result from it. Such were the thoughts that passed through John's mind, mingled with many another gloomy fancy. Adding up long lines of figures was scarcely more unprofitable—could scarcely be of less use to the world. When he thought of his father's precise little sermons, his feelings were different; for Dr Mitford spoke as a member of the Archæological Society might be supposed to speak, being compelled to do so, to a handful of bumpkins who could not, as he was well aware, understand a word he said—and was content with having thus performed the "duty" incumbent on him. *That* might be

mended so far as it went; but who could mend the self-devotion, the unconscious gospel of a life which his mother set before the eyes of the village? They knew that her charity never failed, nor her interest in them, nor the tender service which she was ready to give to the poorest, or even to the wickedest. Twenty-five years this woman, who was as pure as the angels, had been their servant, at their call night and day. Heaven and earth could not produce a more perfect ministration, her son said to himself, as he watched her coming and going; and yet what did it all come to? Had Mrs Mitford seen the thoughts that were going on in his mind, she would have shrunk from him with a certain horror. They were hard thoughts both of God and man. What was the good of it? Nobody, it appeared to John, was the better. If Fanshawe Regis, for one place, had been left to itself, would it have made any difference? Such thoughts are hard to bear, when a man has been trained into the habit of thinking that much, almost everything, can be done for his neighbours if he will but sufficiently exert

himself. Here was a tender good woman who had exerted herself all her life — and what was the end of it? Meanwhile Mrs Mitford walked on cheerfully, holding her son's arm, with a little glow of devotion about her heart, thinking, what did it matter how much labour was spent on the work if but the one stray lamb was brought back to the fold? and pondering in the same breath a new argument by which Robert Little, in the Doctor's great-coat, and his wife in one of her own bonnets, could be got to come to church, and induced to send their children to school.

Sometimes, however, John's strange holiday, which nobody could quite understand, was disturbed by immediate questions still more difficult. Mrs Mitford did not say much, having discovered in her son's eye at the moment of his return that all was not well with him; but she looked wistfully at him from time to time, and surprised him in the midst of his frequent reveries with sudden glances of anxious inquiry which spoke more distinctly than words. She did not mention Kate, which was more significant than if she had spoken

volumes ; and when the letters came in, in the morning, she would turn her head away not to see whether her son expected anything, or if he was disappointed. A mixture of love and pride was in her self-restraint. He should not be forced to confide in her, she had resolved ; she would exercise the last and hardest of all maternal duties towards him, and leave him to himself. But Dr Mitford had no such idea. He was busy at the moment with something for the ‘Gentleman’s Magazine,’ which kept him in his study for the first few days after John’s arrival ; but as soon as his article was off his mind, he began to talk to his son of his prospects, as was natural. This happened in the library, where John was sitting, exactly as he had been sitting that first morning when Kate peeped in at the door and all the world was changed ; though I cannot tell whether the young man at first remembered that. Dr Mitford was seated at the other end of the room, as he had been that day. A ray of October sunshine shone in through one light of the great Elizabethan window and fell in a long line upon the polished oak floor, on the



library carpet, on Dr Mitford's white head, and as far as the wall on the other side of him—a great broad arrow of light, with some colour in it from the shield in the centre of the glass. Behind this was the glimmer of a fire, and John, lifting his weary eyes from his book, or his eyes from his weary book, he could scarcely have told which, became suddenly aware of the absolute identity of the outside circumstances, and held his breath and asked himself, had he dreamed it, or had that interruption ever been? Was the door going to open and Kate to peep in breathless, shy, daring, full of fun and temerity? or had she done it, and turned all the world upside down? When he was asking himself this question Dr Mitford laid down his pen; then he coughed his little habitual cough, which was the well-understood sign between him and his domestic world that he might be spoken to; then he was fretted by the sunshine, and got up and drew the blind down; and then, having quite finished his article, and feeling himself in a mood for a little talk, he took a walk towards his son between the pillars that narrowed the

library in the middle, and looked like a great doorway. He did not go straight to John, but paused on the way to remark upon some empty corners, and to set right some books which had dropped out of their exact places.

"I wish the doctor would return my Early English books," he said, approaching his son; "one ought to make a resolution against lending. You might give me a day, John, just to look up what books are missing, and who has them. I think you know them better than I do. But, by the by, you have not told us how long you can stay."

"I don't think it matters much," said John.

"You don't think it matters much! but that looks as if you were not taking any great trouble to make yourself missed. I don't like that," said Dr Mitford, shaking his head: "depend upon it, my boy, you will never secure proper appreciation until you show the people you are among that another cannot fill your place."

"But the fact is that a dozen others could fill my place, sir," said John, "quite as well as—very probably much better than I."

“What! with Mr Crediton? and his daughter?” said Dr Mitford. He thought he had made a joke, and turned away with a mild little laugh to arrange and caress his folios. Then he went on talking with his back to John—“I should be glad to know what you really think of it now that you have had time to make the experiment. I don’t understand the commercial mind myself. I don’t know that I could be brought to understand it; but the opinion of an intelligence capable of judging, and accustomed to trains of thought so different, could not but be interesting. I should like to hear what you think of it frankly. Somebody has made dog’s ears in this Shakespeare, which is unpardonable,” said the Doctor, passing his hand with sudden indignation over the folded edges. “I should like to know what your opinion is.”

“I think I can get it straight, sir,” said John, “if you will trust the book to me.”

“Thanks—and put a label on it, ‘Not to be lent,’” said Dr Mitford. “It is not to be expected, you know, that the most good-natured of men should lend one of the earliest

editions. What were we talking of? oh, the bank. I hope you are quite satisfied that you can do your duty as well or better in your own way than in the manner we had intended for you. Nothing but that thought would have induced me to yield. It was a disappointment, John," said his father, turning round with a tall volume in his hand—"I cannot deny that it was a great disappointment. Do you really feel that you are able to do your duty better where you are?"

"What is my duty, father?" said John, with a hoarseness in his voice.

And then it was Dr Mitford's turn to show consternation. "Your duty," he faltered—"your duty? It does not say much for my teaching and your mother's if you have to ask that question at this time of day."

This, it will be easy to see, was a very unsatisfactory sort of answer. John got up too, feeling very heavy about the heart. "Relative duty is easy enough," he said; "but absolute duty, what is it? is there such a thing? Is it not just as good both for myself and other people that I should live for myself as I am

doing, instead of living for God and my neighbour like my mother? So far as I can see, it comes to exactly the same thing."

Dr Mitford looked at his son with an absolute astonishment that would have been comical had John been able to see it. But then it was not so much his son's perplexity the Doctor thought of as that curious, quite inexplicable reference. "Like your mother!" the Rector of Fanshawe Regis said, with utter amazement. It took away his breath. He could not even notice his son's question in his consternation. "Yes," said John, not in the least perceiving the point, "what is the good? That is what one asks one's self; it does not seem to make any difference to the world."

Dr Mitford turned, and put up the dog-eared folio on its shelf. He shook his head in his bewilderment, and gave a sigh of impatience. "You young men have a way of talking and of thinking which I don't understand," he said, still shaking his head. "I hope to goodness, John, that you have not been led astray by those ridiculous fallacies of Comtism. You may suppose that as you are not to be a cler-

gyman it does not matter what your opinions are ; but it always matters. A private Christian has as much need to be right as if he were an archbishop ; and I confess, after your careful training, I little expected—a mere farrago of French sentiment and nonsense. Your mother ! what she has to do with the question I can't understand."

"And I am sure neither do I, sir," said John, moved to a laugh, "nor why you should set me down as a Comtist. I am not an anythingist, worse luck—for then, perhaps, one might see a little more plainly what to do."

"If a young man, with the best education England can give, and friends to consult, who, I flatter myself, are not idiots, cannot see what to do, it does not say much for his sense," said Dr Mitford, with some indignation. "I suppose by all this I am to understand that you are tired of the office drudgery and beginning to repent——"

"I don't know that I have anything to repent of," said John, who under this questioning began to get rebellious, as sons are wont to do.

"I advise you to make up your mind," said Dr Mitford, not without a half-tone of contempt. "I never thought you were adapted for business. If experience has shown you this, it is best to take steps at once. You might not like, perhaps, to return to your original destination——"

"Father, this discussion is quite unnecessary," said John, growing red. "I am not tired of office drudgery. No trade, I suppose, is very delightful just at first; and when one begins to think for one's self, there are many questions that arise in one's mind. Yes, mother, I am quite ready. I have been waiting for you this half-hour."

"But not if your papa wants you, my dear," said Mrs Mitford, in her white shawl, standing smiling upon them at the door.

"I can look after the Shakespeare when I come in," said John. That was exactly where Kate had stood peeping—Kate, who, when she was old, would be just such another woman. Would she grow so by his side? Could it ever be that she would come, in all the soft confidence of proprietorship, and look

in upon him as his mother did? All at once it flashed upon him that such a thing might have been, in this very place, in this very way, had he kept his traditionary place. He might have been the Rector, putting up his folios, and she the Lady Bountiful of the parish, as his mother was. This flashed across his mind at the very moment when he was asking what use it was, and feeling that a life spent in doing good was as much thrown away as a life spent in making money. Strange inconsistency! And then he went and took the basket, with its little vials of wine and carefully-packed dainties, out of his mother's hand.

Dr Mitford watched them going away with feelings more odd and strange than he recollected to have experienced for years. He waited till the door was closed, and then he turned abruptly to his books; but these were not satisfactory for the moment, and by-and-by he gave them up and walked impatiently to the window, and saw his wife's white shawl disappear from the garden gate, with her tall boy by her side shadowing over her in the



October sunshine. "His mother!" Dr Mitford said to himself, with a certain snort of wonder and offence—and then went back to his writing-table, and wrote a note to accompany his article to Sylvanus Urban, who was a more comprehensible personage on the whole than either wife or son.

## CHAPTER XXV.

JOHN remained rather more than a fortnight at home. His arm healed and his health improved during this interval of quiet. But he did not relieve his mind by any disclosure of his feelings. Indeed, what was there to disclose? He asked himself the question ten times in a day. He had come to no breach with Kate, he had not quarrelled with her father; he had, on the contrary, increased his claims upon Mr Crediton by actual service; and the something which had sprung up between Kate and himself was like a wall of glass or of transparent ice, changing nothing to outward appearance. He spent his time in an uneasy languor, sometimes roused to positive suffering, but more generally in mere discomfort, vague as his thoughts were, as his

prospects were, as all the world was to him. It seemed even a thing of the past that his feelings should be very vehement about that or any other subject. He had gone through a great deal of active pain, but now it seemed all to be passive, and he only a kind of spectator. A host of questions had widened out like circles in the water round the central question. . What was life worth? was it any great matter how it was spent? The banker among his manifold concerns, or Mr Whichelo among the clerks, or the Rector of Fanshawe Regis in his library—did it matter to any mortal creature which was which? The one was laying up money which a great fire or a scoundrel at the other end of the world might make an end of in a moment; the other was laughed at behind his back, and outwitted by the young men whom he thought he had so well in hand; and the third—what was the parish the better for Dr Mitford? And yet John had to face the matter steadily, as if it were of the greatest importance, and decide which of these pretences at existence he would adopt. He got no letter during this curious

interval. The outer world kept silence and did not interfere with his ponderings. Heaven and earth, and even Kate and his mother, left him to take his own way.

It was not until the last morning of his stay that Mrs Mitford said anything to John on the subject. She had gone down to breakfast a little earlier than usual, perhaps, with a little innocent stealthy intention of looking at the letters, and making sure what there was for her boy; and there was one little letter lying by John's plate which made his mother's heart beat quicker. Yes; at last it was evident Kate had written to him; and if there had been any quarrel or misunderstanding, here surely must be the end of it. She watched for his appearance with speechless anxiety; and of course he was late that morning, as was to be expected. And it was very easy to see by his indifferent air that he was not looking for any letter. When he perceived it he gave a little start, and his mother pretended to be very much occupied with the coffee. He read it twice over from beginning to end, which was not a long process, for it

only occupied one page of a small sheet of note-paper ; and then he put it into his pocket and began to eat his breakfast and talk just as usual. Mrs Mitford, anxious and wondering, was brought to her wits' end.

"You had better order the phaeton, John," said Dr Mitford, "if you are going by the twelve train."

"I need not go till the evening," said John ; "and my mother means to walk there with me ; don't you, mamma ?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs Mitford, smiling upon him. She had been looking forward to this last heartrending pleasure, and thinking that then he would perhaps tell her something, if indeed there was anything to tell.

"Then let the phaeton take your portman-teau and bring your mother home," said the Doctor, "if you insist on taking her such a long walk. For my part I can never see the good of such expeditions. It is much better to say good-bye at home."

"But I like the walk," said Mrs Mitford, eagerly ; and the Doctor, who did not quite approve of the pair and their doings, shook his

head, and gathered up his papers (he had no less than two proof-sheets to correct, and a *revise*, for he was very particular), and went off to his work. "You will find me in the library whenever I am wanted," he said, as he withdrew. He thought his wife was spoiling her son, as she had spoiled him when he was ten years old, and he did not approve of it; but when a woman is so foolish, what can the most sensible of men and fathers do?

And then the mother and son were left alone, with that letter in John's pocket which might explain so much of the mystery. But he did not say a word about it, nor about Kate, nor anything that concerned his happiness; and when Mrs Mitford talked of his new shirts and stockings (which was the only other subject she found herself capable of entering upon), he talked of them too, and agreed in her remarks about the negligence of washerwomen, and all the difficulty of keeping linen a good colour in a town. "As for your socks, my poor boy, I never saw such mending," she said, almost with the tears in her eyes. "I must take it all out and darn it

over again as it ought to be. When darning is nicely done, I never think the stocking looks a bit the worse ; but how any woman could drag the two edges together like some of these, I can't understand."

"It is always hard work dragging edges together," said John, getting up from the table. "I think I'll go and say good-bye to old Mrs Fanshawe, mother. It is too long a walk for you."

"I could not go there and to the station too," said Mrs Mitford, "and I ought not to neglect the schools because I am so happy as to have my own boy. Yes, dear ; go and see the old people : you must keep up the old ties for our sakes, even though they are to be broken off so far as the Rectory goes ;" and she smiled at him and gave a little nod of her head dismissing him, by way of concealing that she wanted to cry. She did cry as soon as he was gone, and had scarcely time to dry her eyes when Jervis came in to clear the table. Mrs Mitford snubbed him on the spot, with a vehemence which took that personage quite by surprise. "I observe that Mr John's

things have not been laid out for him properly, as they ought to have been," she said, suddenly, snapping his nose off, as Jervis said. "I trust I shall find everything properly brushed and folded to-day. It is a piece of negligence, Jervis, which I don't at all understand." "And Missis give her head a toss, and walks off as if she was the queen," said the amazed man-of-all-work when he got to the kitchen, and was free to unburden himself. After this Mrs Mitford had another cry in her own room, and put on her bonnet and went across to the schools, wondering through all the lessons and all the weary chatter of the children,—Oh, what was the matter with her boy? oh, was he unhappy? had they quarrelled? must not his mother know?

Meanwhile John strode across the country to Fanshawe to bid the old squire and his old wife good-bye. He went, as the crow flies, over the stubble, and by the hedge-sides, never pausing to draw breath. Not because he was excited by his departure, or by the letter in his pocket, or by any actual incident. On



the contrary, he was quite still, like the day, which was a grey autumn morning, with wistful scraps of blue on the horizon, and a brooding, pondering quiet in the air. All is over for the year, nature was saying to herself. Shall there be another year? shall old earth begin again, take in the new seeds, keep the spring germs alive for another blossoming? or shall all come to a conclusion at last, and the new heavens and the new earth come down out of those rolling clouds and fathomless shrill breaks of blue? John was in much the same mood. Kate's little note in his pocket had a kind of promise in it of the new earth and the new heaven. But was it a solid, real promise, or only a dissolving view, that would vanish as he approached it? and might not an end be better, and no more delusive hopes? Mrs Fanshawe was very kind when he got to the hall. She told him of poor Cecily, just nineteen (Kate's age), who was dying at Nice, and cried a little, and smiled, and said, "Oh, my dear boy, it don't matter for us; we can't be long of going after her." But though she was reconciled to that, she made a little outcry

over John's leave-taking. "Going so soon! and what will your poor mother say?" cried the old lady. "I am afraid you think more of one smile from Miss Crediton than of all your old friends; and I suppose it is natural," she added, as she shook hands with him. Did he care more for Kate's smile than for anything else? He walked home again in the same dead sort of way, without being able to answer even such a question. He did not care for anything, he thought, except, now that he was at Fanshawe, to get away; and probably when he got to Camelford his desire would be to get back again, or to Fernwood, or to anywhere, except just the place where he happened to be.

It was evening when he set out to go to the station, with his mother leaning on his arm. The evening comes early in October, and it was necessary that she should get back to dinner at seven. Twilight was coming on as they walked together along the dewy road, where the hedgerows were all humid and chill with the dew, which some of these nights would grow white upon the leaves before any one

knew, and make winter out of autumn. A sort of premonition of the first frost was in the air; and the hawthorns were very rusty and shabby in their foliage, but picked out here and there by red flaming bramble-leaves, which warmed up the hedgerows notwithstanding the damp. The mother and son walked slowly, to spin out the time as long as might be. To be sure they might, as Dr Mitford said, have just as well talked indoors; but then the good Doctor knew nothing about that charm of isolation and unity—the silent world all round about, the soft, harmonious motion, the tender contact and support. They could speak so low to each other without any fear of not being heard. They could look at each other if they would, yet were not compelled to any meeting of the eyes. There is no position in which it is so difficult to disagree, so natural to confide and trust. Mrs Mitford's very touch upon her son's arm was in itself a caress. My dear, dear boy, her eyes said as she looked at him. She had carried him in those soft arms, and now it was her turn to lean upon him. This thought was

always in her mind when she leant upon John's arm.

"I should not wonder," she said, cunningly, leading up to her subject with innocent pretences of general conversation, "if we had frost to-night."

"The air is very still, and very cold: it is quite likely," said John, assenting, without much caring what he said.

"And actually winter is coming! after this wonderful summer we have had. What a summer it has been! I don't remember such a long stretch of bright weather since the year you went first to school. I was so glad of the first frost that year, thinking of Christmas. You will come home for Christmas, John," said Mrs Mitford, suddenly, with a tighter clasp of his arm.

"I cannot tell, mother. I don't seem to realise Christmas," said John.

"Well, dear, I won't press you for any promise; but you know it will be a very poor Christmas without you. Life itself feels poor without my boy. There! I did not mean to have said it; but I am a foolish woman, and it is quite true."

“Life is so poor in any case. I don’t know how it can matter one way or another,” said John, with a shrug of his shoulders. He was not touched so much as impatient ; and unconsciously he quickened his pace and drew her on with him, faster than it was easy for her to go.

“We are in plenty of time for the train,” Mrs Mitford said ; “not so quick, if you please, my dear. Oh, John, it is so strange to hear you say that life is poor ! Have you nothing to tell me, my own boy ? I have never asked a question, though you may think my heart has been sore enough sometimes. What is the matter ? won’t you tell me now ?”

“There is nothing to tell—nothing is the matter,” said John.

“But you are not happy, my dear boy. Do you think your mother could help seeing that ? Oh, John, what is it ? Is it her father ? Do you feel the change ? It must be something about Kate ?”

“It is nothing at all, mother,” said John, with hasty impatience ; and then it suddenly occurred to him that he was going away into utter solitude, and that here was the only

being in the world to whom he could even partially open his heart. She felt the change of his voice, though she had no clue to the fitfulness of his thoughts. "It is quite true," he continued, "there is nothing to tell; and yet all is not well, mother. I can't tell you how or why. I am jangled somehow out of tune—that is all; there is nobody to blame."

"I could see that, my dear," she said, looking wistfully at him; "but is that all you have to say to your mother, John?"

"There is nothing more to say," he repeated. "I cannot tell you, I can't tell myself what is the matter. There is nothing the matter. It is a false position somehow, I suppose—that is all."

"In the bank, John?"

"In the bank, and in the house, and in the world, mother," he cried, with sudden vehemence. "I don't seem able to take root anywhere; everything looks false and forced and miserable. I can neither go on nor go back, and I stagnate standing still. Never mind; I suppose it is just an experience like any other, and will have to be borne."

Then there passed through Mrs Mitford's mind as quick as lightning that passage about those who put their hand to the plough and draw back. But she restrained herself. "I suppose it is just the great change, my dear," she said, faltering, yet soothing him, "and all that you have given up—for you have given up a great deal, John. I suppose your time is not your own now, and you can't do what you like? And sitting at a desk—you who used to be free to read, or to walk, or to go on the river, or to help your papa, or see your friends—it must make a great difference, John."

"Yes, I suppose that is what it is," he said, feeling that he had successfully eluded the subject, and yet celebrating his success with a sigh.

"But I hope it is made up to you in another way," Mrs Mitford said, suddenly, looking up into his face. He thought he had got off, but she did not mean to let him off. She was a simple little woman, but yet not so simple but what she could employ a legitimate artifice, like the rest of her kind. "You had a letter from Kate this morning, dear. I saw her little

handwriting. I suppose she makes up for everything, John ?”

They were drawing near the station, and she spoke fast, partly from that reason, partly to make her attack the more potent, and to leave him no time to think. But he answered her a great deal more readily than she had expected.

“Is it fair upon a girl to expect her to make up for all that ?” he asked. “Mother, I ask myself sometimes, if she gave up her own life for me as I have done for her—no, not altogether for her—could I make it up to her ? Is it fair or just to expect it ? Life means a great deal, after all—more than just what you call happiness. You will think I am very hard-hearted ; but, do you know, it almost appears to me sometimes as if a man could get on better without happiness, if he had plenty of work to do, than he could without the work, with only the happiness to comfort him. Is it blasphemy, mother ? Even if it is, you will not be too hard upon me.”

Mrs Mitford paused a little to think over her answer ; and perhaps anybody who takes an interest in her will be shocked to hear that



she was rather—glad—half-glad—with a kind of relief at her heart. “John,” she said, “I don’t know what to say. I am—sorry—you have found it out, my dear. Oh, I am very sorry you have found it out—for it is hard; but, do you know, I fear it is true.”

“I wonder how my mother found it out,” he said, looking down upon her with that strange surprise which moves a child when it suddenly suspects some unthought-of conflict in the settled immovable life which it has been familiar with all its days, and accepted as an eternal reality. He had propounded his theory as the very worst and very saddest discovery in existence, and lo! she had accepted it as a truism. It bewildered John so that he could not add another word.

“One finds everything out if one lives long enough,” she said, hastily, with a nervous smile. “And, my dear, this is what I always thought—this is why I always disapproved of this bank scheme. You were hurried into it without time to think. And now that you find it does not answer, oh, my boy, what is to be done? You should not lose any time, John.

You should come to an understanding with Mr Crediton and Kate——”

Heavy as his heart was, John could not but smile. “You go so fast, mother dear, that you take away my breath.”

“So fast! what can be too fast, when you are unhappy, my dear? One can see at a glance that you are unhappy. Oh, John, come back! Believe me, my own boy, the only comfort is doing God’s work; everything else is unsatisfactory. Oh, my dear, come home! If I but saw you taking to the parish work, and coming back to your own life, I should care for nothing more—nothing more in this world.”

“Softly, softly,” said John. “My dear mother, I was not thinking of the parish work—far, very far from it. I cannot tell you what I was thinking of. I may find what I want in the bank after all. Here is the train, and James waiting for you with the phaeton. Let me put you in before I go away.”

“But oh, John, if it cannot be for the present—if you cannot come back all at once—now that your mind is unsettled, dear, oh

think it carefully over this time, and consider what I say."

"*This time*," John said to himself, when he had bidden his mother good-bye and had thrown himself into a corner of the railway carriage with his face towards Camelford—"think it carefully over *this time*." The words filled him with strange shame. He had made one disruption in his life, it was evident, without sufficient care or thought. Was he one of the wretched vacillators so contemptible to a young man, who are always changing, and yet never come to any settled determination? His cheeks flushed crimson, though he was all alone, as the thought came into his mind. No; this time he must make no hasty change; this time, at least, no false position must be consented to. He must put Kate out of his mind, and every vain hope and yearning after what people call happiness. Happiness! most people managed to do without it; even—could it be possible?—his mother managed to do without it; for happiness, after all, is not life. *This time* there must be no mistake on that head.

It was night when he reached his lodging ; and his mind was as doubtful and his thoughts as confused and uncertain as when he had left it. He went into his dreary little parlour, and had his lamp lighted, and sat down in the silence. He had come back again just as he went away. The decision which he had to make seemed to have been waiting for him here—waiting all these days—and faced him the moment he returned. What was he going to do ? He sat down and listened to the clock ticking, and to now and then an unfrequent step passing outside, or the voice of his landlady talking in the little underground kitchen. His portmanteau, which he had brought in with him, was on the floor just by the door. The thought came upon him in his unrest to seize it again in his hand, and rush out and jump into the first cab, and go back to Fernwood ; not that he expected any comfort at Fernwood, but only that it was the only other change possible to him. If he arrived there late at night, when nobody expected him, and went in suddenly without any warning, what should he see ? The im-

pulse to make the experiment was so strong upon him that he actually got up from his seat to obey it, but then came to himself, and sat down again, and took out Kate's little letter. It was very short, and there was nothing in it to excite any man. This was all that Kate said:—

“DEAREST JOHN,—Why don't you write to me? You used to write almost every day, and now here is a full fortnight and I have not heard from you. I think it so strange. I hope you are not ill, nor anybody belonging to you. It makes me very anxious. Do write. —Ever your affectionate KATE.”

That was all. There was nothing in it to open any fresh fountain in his breast. He folded it up carefully and slowly into its envelope, and put it back into his pocket. Write to her! why should he write? It was not as if he wanted to upbraid her, or to point out any enormity she had done. She had not done anything; and what could he say? The future was so misty before him, and his own

heart so languid, that her appeal made no impression upon him. Why should he do it? But he stopped again just before he put the letter in his pocket, and gave another glance at his portmanteau. Should he go, and carry her his answer, and judge once again what was the best for her and for himself? He gave up that fancy when the clock struck eight slowly in his ears. It was too late to go to Fernwood that night; and yet there were hours and hours to pass before he could throw himself on his bed with any chance of sleeping; and he had no business to occupy him, or work to do—and how was this long, slow, silent night to be hastened on its tardy wing? John rose at last, with a kind of desperation, and went out. He had nowhere to go, having sought no acquaintances in Camelford. There was nobody in the place that he cared to see, or indeed would not have gone out of his way to avoid; but the streets were all lit up, and some of them were noisy enough. John wandered through them in the lamp-light with strange thoughts. He seemed to himself like a man who had lost his way in the world.

He was like Dante when he stood in the midst of his life and found that he had missed the true path. To go on seemed impossible; and when he would have turned back, how many wild beasts were in the way to withstand him! Was there anybody, he wondered, who could lead him back that long, long roundabout way through Hell and Purgatory and Heaven? With such a question in his mind, he wandered into places such as he had never entered before; he watched the people in the streets, and went after them to their haunts. A strange phantasmagoria seemed to pass before his eyes, of dancers and singers, and stupid crowds gaping and looking on, amid smoke and noise and sordid merry-making. He heard their rude jests and their talk, and loud harsh peals of laughter; he listened to the songs they were listening to with the rough clamour of applause in which there was no real enjoyment. He followed them mutely—a solitary, keen-eyed spectator—into the places where they danced, and where they drank, and where they listened to those songs, with a strange sense of unreality

upon him all the while. They were as unreal as if they had been lords and ladies yawning at a State ball. And then all at once John found himself in a dreary half-lighted room, in the midst of a Wesleyan prayer-meeting, where half-seen people, like ghosts in the half-light, were calling to God to have mercy upon them. He gazed at the prayer-meeting as he did at the music-hall, wondering what all the people meant. Would they go on like that till death suddenly came and turned the performance into a reality at last? He had no Virgil to guide him, no *Donna sceso del cielo* to be his passport everywhere. And he scarcely knew what were the doubts he wanted to be solved. "Now I shall sleep at last," was all he said to himself as he went in when the night was far advanced, having spent it in visiting many places where Dr Mitford's son should not have entered. Was he taking to evil ways? or was there any chance that he could solve his own problem by means such as these?



## CHAPTER XXVI.

NEXT morning John did not permit himself any musings ; he got up with the air of a man who has something to do for the first time for many weeks. There was nobody to do anything for him in his poor lodging ; no Jervis to unpack his things and put them in order. He had opened his portmanteau to take out what he wanted from it, but he had not unpacked it. It stood open with all its straps undone, and everything laid smooth by the careful hands at home, and John closed it once more and left it in readiness to be removed again when he went out. It was quite early in the October morning, which was bright, and sharp, and frosty, with patches of white rime lying in the unsunned corners, and great blobs of cold dew hanging from the branches of the

suburban trees. "My mother has had her frost," John could not help saying to himself, as he went out. And all the world was astir, looking as unlike that feverish, noisy world which had smoked and cheered at the music-halls last night, as could be supposed. When he saw the people moving about so briskly in the sharp, clear air, he could not but ask himself, were they the same? Was that the man who had thumped with hands and feet, and roared open-mouthed, at the imbecility of the comic song? or was that he who led the chorus of exclamations at the prayer-meeting? John was in so strange a state of mind that the one was to him very much as the other, both phantoms—one coarsely making believe to be amused, the other coarsely pretending to pray. He went to the bank first, where all the clerks had just settled down in the first freshness of morning work. He went in at the swinging doors with the early public, and stood outside the counter looking for some one to address himself to. In his first glance round he saw that his place at the desk in the window from which he had so often watched Kate was filled

by another ; which was a small matter enough, and yet went through him with a sudden thrill, adding firmness to the resolution which began to form in his mind. After a moment Mr Whichelo rose from his desk, and came forward, holding out his hand, to meet him. "How are you, Mr Mitford? I hope I see you quite recovered : how is the arm?" said Mr Whichelo, with bustling cordiality ; and John had to pause to explain how it was that he was able to do without his bandages, and no longer required to wear the injured arm in a sling.

"Mr Crediton has not come in to-day. I don't suppose we are likely to see him to-day ; but you must know better than we do, Mr Mitford, for I suppose you have just come from Fernwood?"

"No, it is some time since I left Fernwood. I have been at home," said John.

"Dear me!" said the head clerk, raising his eyebrows. Mr Whichelo thought there was no such place as Fernwood in the kingdom, and was naturally astonished that any man could relinquish its delights. But then he added, with condescending moral approval,

“And quite right, too, Mr Mitford; when there is anything the matter with you, there is no place like home.”

Then there was a momentary pause; the public were coming and going, in small numbers as yet, but still enough to keep the doors swinging and the clerks at the counter employed. But Mr Whichelo and John stood in the centre, between the two lines of desks, taking no notice of the public. John would have known quite well what to say to Mr Crediton had he found him there, but it was more difficult with his head clerk.

“Ah, I see,” said Mr Whichelo; “you always had a very quick eye, Mr Mitford—you perceive the change we have made.”

“I perceive you have filled up my place,” said John.

“No, no—not filled up your place; I have put in a junior temporarily to do the work. My dear Mr Mitford,” said the head clerk, with a smile, “if you were only an ordinary *employé* like one of the rest——”

“I should not be worth my salt,” said John, with an attempt at a laugh.

“Very far from that; you are only too good for us—too good for us, that is all. It seems a shame, with your education, to see you making entries that any lad could make. But of course, Mr Mitford, you occupy a very different position. We are all aware of that.”

“A false position,” said John. “Don’t disturb the young fellow for me. No, I have not come back to work. I want to see Mr Crediton if I can. You don’t expect him to-day? nor to-morrow? Then I must see him somewhere else——”

“At Fernwood,” said Mr Whichelo; “you can always see him at Fernwood.”

“Very well,” said John. He felt as if he had got his orders when these words were said. Of course it was to Fernwood he must go to see if any comfort was to be had there. Fanshawe threw no light upon what he ought to do, neither did Camelford; and Fernwood was the only place that remained. He shook hands with Mr Whichelo again, and went out with a certain alacrity. The junior at his desk in the window no longer troubled him. Yes; no doubt the boy would sit there, and

see Kate come and go, and take no thought. The beautiful Miss Crediton, with all her gaieties and splendour, would be nothing to him : far better that he should fill that corner and make his entries, than that John should sit there consuming his heart. Fernwood was ten miles off, but it was a bright day, and to walk there was the best thing he could do. It gave him time to think, and it kept up a certain rhythm of movement and action about him which prevented him from thinking—and that on the whole was the best. The long road spun along like a thread, lengthening and lengthening as he went on, moving as if off a wheel, with half-stripped trees and falling leaves, and brown hedges, and here and there the russet glory of a bramble-branch trailing over the humid grass. Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel, he seemed to hear some one singing as he went on and on ; and the gleaming line of path spun out, circling out of the horizon on one side, back into it on the other, and there seemed no reason why it should ever come to any pause. His brain was giddy, and spun, too, as the road did. He went on with

a buzzing in his ears, as if he too were on the wheel, and was winding, winding, and revolving with it, now up, now down, going on and on. What the end was, or if there was any end, he did not seem to know. It was the measured chant, the circles woven by mystic feet, never ending, still beginning. He had come to the very park of Fernwood before he roused himself from this strange dreamy sense of movement. It was a brilliant autumn, and already the beech-trees and the oaks were dressed in a hundred colours. The gentlemen of the party would of course be among the covers—and the ladies — Here John paused, and began to ask himself what his meaning was. Was it Kate he had come to see? was it into her hands that once more, once again, like a fool, he was going to put his fate?

He stopped, and leaned upon a great beech, which stood with a little forest of juniper-bushes round it, withdrawn from the road. It was on the outskirts of the park, just where two paths met—one starting off into the wilder tangled ground beyond the open; the other

leading up towards the house on a parallel with the avenue which John had just left. He was crossing through the brushwood to gain this footpath, when he stopped there against the beech-tree to collect himself, feeling giddy. It was a huge beech, with a trunk vast enough to have hidden a company of people, and great russet branches sweeping down, and the juniper in circles, like the stones of the Druids, making a sort of jungle round it. Was it an evil or a good fate that brought him there at that moment of all others? He had scarcely stopped, and the sound of his foot crushing down the juniper could not have ceased in the still air, when his eye caught a gleam of colour and some moving figures passing close to him on the other side of the beech. He stood like one bewildered when he saw that it was Kate. She was walking along slowly at a very meditative pace, with her head drooping and her eyes cast down, so far occupied with her thoughts that she neither heard nor saw nor suspected the presence of any observing bystander. And she was not alone. Walking



by her side, with his eyes upon her, was Fred Huntley. She was gazing on the ground, but he was gazing at her. Her face was abstracted and full of thought; but his was eager, flushed with wishes and hopes and expectation. They were not saying anything to each other. John did not hear a word as they went slowly past; but imagine how it must have felt to wake up out of a feverish haze of doubt and inquietude and unreality, and suddenly open his eyes on such a sight! He stood spell-bound, scarcely venturing to breathe, and heard the rustle and sweep of her dress over the grass, and her sometimes faltering, unsteady step, and Huntley's foot, that rang firm upon the path. Their very breathing seemed to come to him in the air, and the faint violet scent, which was Kate's favourite perfume, and the movement and rustle of her going. They passed as if they had been a dream, and John held his breath, and all his life concentrated itself into his eyes. Her figure detached itself so against the still autumnal landscape, her grey dress, the blue ribbons that fluttered softly about her, the soft ruffled

feathers, lightly puffed up against the wind in her hat—and the man by her side, with his eyes so intent upon her. It was an affair of a moment, and they were gone; and as soon as they had passed out of hearing, and were about to disappear among the trees, they began to talk. He heard their voices, but could not tell what they said; but the voices were low, toned to the key of that still landscape, and of something still more potential than the landscape; and John turned from the scene, which was stamped on his memory as if in lines of fire, and looked himself as it were in the face, feeling that this at last was the truth which had burst upon him, scattering to the wind all his dreams.

He turned without a word, and walked back to Camelford. There seemed no more doubt or power of question in his mind. He did not even feel as if any painful accident had happened to him; only that it was all over—finished and past, and the seal put to the grave of his dreams. He even walked back with more assured steps, with less sense of a burden on his shoulders and a yoke about his

neck. It had been very sweet and very bitter, delightful and miserable, while it lasted ; but now it was over. And it never occurred to him that the conclusion which he thus accepted so summarily was as unreasonable as the beginning. No ; the time of dreaming was over, he thought, and now at last there stood revealed to him the real and the true.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

IT was late in the afternoon when John reached Camelford. He had stopped to rest at a roadside public-house, where he ate and drank, as a man might do in the exhaustion of grief coming home from a funeral. He had sat before the rustic door, and watched the carts that went slowly past with heavy wheels, and the unfrequent passengers ; and he had felt very much as if he had been at a funeral. It was a long walk, and he was very footsore and weary when he reached his lodgings. He was out of training, and the fire and his accident had impaired his strength, and his heart was not light enough to give him any assistance. When he shut himself once more into his little parlour, he was so much worn out that he had no strength to do anything. He had meant to

return only for the sake of the portmanteau, which imagination represented to him lying open on the floor of his bedroom, all packed, which it was a comfort to think of; but after his twenty-miles walk he had no longer the energy to gather his little possessions together. He laid his aching limbs on the sofa and tried to rest. But it was very hard to rest; he wanted to be in motion all the time; he did not feel able to confront the idea of spending all the gloomy evening alone in that dreary little room. Home, home, his mind kept saying. It would not be cheerful at home. He did not know how he was to bear the stillness, and his mother's cry of wonder, and his father's questionings. But yet a necessity was upon him to go on and make an end of the whole matter. After his first pause of weariness, he sprang up and rang his bell, and told his landlady he was going away. "Get my bill ready, please," he said; "and if you will put my things together for me, and send for a cab for the eight o'clock train——" "Lord, sir, I hope it aint nothing in the rooms! they're nice rooms as ever could be, and as

comfortable as I could make them, or any woman," she said. John comforted her *amour propre* as well as he could, with a tale of circumstances that compelled his departure, and felt as if he had been addressing a public meeting when his short colloquy was over. Never in his life before had he been so tired—not ill nor sad to speak of—but tired; so fatigued that he did not know what to do with himself. But it was still only four o'clock, and there were four hours to be got through, and a great deal to do. He got his writing things together with as much difficulty as if they had been miles apart, and threw himself on the sofa again, and wrote. The first letter was to Mr Crediton, and over that the pen went on fluently enough.

“DEAR SIR,—I think it right to let you know at once—as soon as I am perfectly sure of my own mind—that I feel obliged to relinquish the post you kindly gave me three months ago in the bank. Early training, and the habits belonging to a totally different kind of life, have at last made the position unbear-

able. I am very sorry, but it is better to stop before worse come of it, if worse could come. I do not suppose that the suddenness of my resolution can put you to any inconvenience, as I saw, on visiting the bank this morning, that my place had been already filled up. I meant to have seen you, but found it impracticable. I hope you will accept my apologies for any abruptness that there may be in this letter, and regrets that I have not been able better to make use of the opportunity you afforded me——”

Here John came to a stop—opportunity for what? Opportunity of winning your confidence—opportunity of gaining an acquaintance with business—of proving myself worthy of higher trust? He could not adopt any of these expressions. The shorter the letter, the least said, the better. He broke off abruptly without concluding his sentence. He had very little to thank Mr Crediton for; but yet he could not, with any regard to justice, blame him. Kate’s father, though he had done little for, had done nothing absolutely against him.

It was not Mr Crediton he found fault with—Mr Crediton was very justifiable; and was it, could it be, that he was about to find fault with Kate?

He began to write to her half-a-dozen times at least. He began indignantly—he began tenderly,—he upbraided—he remonstrated—his pen ran away with him. He had meant to use one class of words, and under his very eyes it employed another. He wrote her ever so many letters. He set before her all his passion—all his readiness to sacrifice himself—all the tortures he had suffered at the window of the bank seeing her come and go and having no share in her life. He told her what a chill blank had come over him at Fernwood—how he had felt that he was nothing to her. He told her what he had seen that morning. He was eloquent, pathetic, overwhelming. His own heart felt as if it must burst while he wrote; but as he read over each completed page, John had still so much good sense left that he dragged his stiff limbs from the sofa and put it in the fire. It was thus he occupied almost all the time he had to wait; and



it was only just before his cab came to the door that he put into its envelope this letter, in which it will be seen he neither remonstrated nor upbraided, nor even gave her up. He could not give her up, and how could he accuse her? He accuse Kate! If she was guilty her heart would do that—if not—— But alas! the latter alternative was impossible; only for “utter courtesy,” for utter tenderness, he could not blame the woman he loved.

“I do not know how to write,” he said, “though you tell me to write. Dear Kate, dearest Kate—you will always be dearest to me.—This may pass over, and be to you as the merest dream; but to me it must always be the centre and heart of my life. I don’t know what to say to you. I have not written, not out of lack of love, but lack of hope. If I could think I was any way necessary to you—if I could feel you wanted me—but your sweet life is so complete; and what is mine to be tacked on to it? I don’t know what to say. Silence seems the best. Dear! dearest! you are so bright that my heart fails me when

I look at you. I drop down into the shade, and there seems nothing left for me but to keep still. I try to rouse myself with the thought of what you say—that you want me to write, that *you are anxious*—anxious about me! And you mean it, dear—you mean it, I know; but the words have a soft meaning to you different from their meaning to me. And you have no need of me, Kate. I feel it, and that takes the words out of my mouth, and all the courage out of my heart.

“I was at Fernwood to-day, and saw you, though you did not see me. You were walking in the little footpath near the avenue. Ah, Kate! but for that I think I could have gone to you, and said some things I cannot write. Do not be grieved in your kind heart because I am leaving Camelford. It was a mistake, but I was to blame. I am going home, and I don’t quite know what I shall do; but time, perhaps, will make the way clear. Dearest, if ever you should want me—but how should you want me? God bless you! I have no claim to make, nor plea to put forth; but I am always and ever yours—always and for

ever, whatever may happen—yours and yours only to command,

“JOHN MITFORD.”

He put the two letters into their envelopes, and sealed and put them into the post with his own hand as he went to the station. He carried all his possessions with him—not merely the portmanteau; and he was dead tired—so tired that he would have passed Fanshawe station and gone on perhaps to London—for he had dropt asleep in the train—but for the guard, who knew him. When he found himself on the little platform at Fanshawe, chilly and stupid as a man is who has just awakened from sleep, the only strong feeling in his mind was an overwhelming desire to get to bed. He did not seem capable of realising that he had got home again, after his disastrous voyage into the world—he only thought of going to sleep; and it was not his mother’s wondering welcome he was thinking of, or the questions they would ask him, but a pleasant vision of his own room, with the fire burning in the grate, and the white fra-

grant sheets opened up and inviting him to rest. He felt half asleep when he crossed the threshold of the Rectory, and walked into the drawing-room to his mother, who gave a shriek of mingled delight and alarm at so unlooked-for an apparition. "John, you are ill; something has happened," Mrs Mitford cried out, in an agony of apprehension. "I am only sleepy, mother," he said. That was all he could say. He sat down and smiled at her, and told her how tired he was. "Nothing particular has happened, except in my own mind," he added, when he came to himself a little, "and not much even there. I am awfully tired. Don't ask me anything, and don't be unhappy. There is nothing to be unhappy about. You shall know it all to-morrow. But please, mother, let me go to bed."

"And so you shall, my dear," said Mrs Mitford; "but, oh, my own boy, what is the matter? What can I say to your papa? What is it? Oh, John, I know there is something wrong."

"Only that I shall go to sleep here," he said, "and snore—which you never could endure."

There is nothing wrong, mamma, only I have walked twenty miles to-day, and I am very tired. I have come home to be put to bed."

"Then you are ill," she said. "You have caught one of those dreadful fevers. I see it now. Your eyes are so heavy you can scarcely look at me. You have been in some of the cottages, or in the back streets, where there is always fever; but Jervis shall run for the doctor."

"A fire in Mr John's room directly, Jervis—directly, mind; and some boiling water to make him a hot drink—he has caught a bad cold. Oh, my dear, you are sure that is all? And, John, you have really, really come home—to stay? You don't mean to stay?"

"I don't know what I mean," he said. "I have left Camelford. I have come back like a piece of bad money. But, mother, don't ask me any questions to-night."

"Not one," she answered promptly; and then besieged him with her eyes—"Twenty miles, my dear boy! what a long walk! no wonder you are tired. But what put it into your head, John? Never mind, my dear. I

did not mean to ask any more questions. But, dear me! where could you want to go that was twenty miles off? That is what bewilders me."

"You shall hear all about it to-morrow," said John, rising to his feet. He was so tired that he staggered as he rose, and his mother turned upon him eyes in which another kind of fear flashed up. She grew frightened at his weakness, and at the pale smile that came over his face.

"Yes, my dear, go to bed—that will be the best thing," she said, looking scared and miserable. And it went to John's heart to see the painful looks she gave him, though it was with a mixture of indignation and amusement that he perceived the new turn her thoughts had taken. He could not but laugh as he put his arm round her to say good-night.

"It is not that either," he said; "you need not mistrust me. Staying in Camelford will not answer, mother. I must find some other way. And I have had a long walk. I am better now that my head is under my mother's wing. Good-night."

“ I will bring you your hot drink, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford. She followed him in her great wonder to the foot of the stairs, and watched him go up wearily with his candle, and then she returned and made the hot drink, and carried it up-stairs with her own hands. Was it all over ?—was he hers again ?—her boy, with nobody else to share him ? “ If he only escapes without a heartbreak, I shall be the happiest woman in the world,” she said to herself, as she went down-stairs again, wiping tears of joy out of her eyes. Without a heartbreak ! while John laid his head on the familiar pillow and felt as if he had died. He had no heart any longer to break. He must have something to do, and no doubt he would get up next day and go and do something, if it was only working in the garden ; but as for the heart, that which gives all the zest and all the bitterness to life, that was dead. His life was over and ended, and it seemed to him as if he could never come alive again.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

LIFE at Fernwood had been going on much the same as usual during these days which were so decisive to John. It was Fred Huntley's inquiry as to when she had heard from John which had inspired Kate's note to him. She had been half unhappy before, and full of wondering thoughts ; but that question roused her. She could not let her love glide away from her without a word ; she did not want to lose him ; she could not believe it possible that there was any danger of losing him. All the rest were very well to talk to, or to flirt with, or dance with, or make useful. But John was John, and she had no desire to put any one else in his place. Kate said this to herself, and then she went down-stairs and yawned behind her fan at the other people who had so



little to say, and was glad when Fred Huntley—but not till half the evening was over—came to her side to talk to her. He was a clever talker, and managed her very skilfully; and Kate could not make out how it was that all the other people were so stupid. She gave her father a little defiant glance when she caught his eye. “Papa seems to think I have no right to talk to any one now,” she said, half to herself, thus making Fred her confidant unawares.

“Does he say so?” asked Fred.

“Oh no, not in so many words—but he watches me as if I could not take care of myself. It is too bad. I don’t think he ever made himself so disagreeable all my life before. I had a great deal better stay in my own room where nobody need see me. To think of papa, you know, growing jealous for John——”

She was so thoughtless that the idea had begun to move her to amusement; when she suddenly remembered words which Fred himself had said to her not so very long ago, and stopped short suddenly, growing very red, and naturally giving double point by her full stop

and her blush to the suggestive words. "I mean it is so odd not to be able to do and say what one likes," she went on hurriedly, faltering, and growing redder and redder in her consciousness. Fred was standing before her, leaning over the back of a chair, and looking very earnestly in her face.

"So far as I am concerned," he said, with a smile, "I will not have your liberty curbed. You must do and say what you like without any thought of me."

"Of you, Mr Huntley!" said Kate, with some confusion. "What should papa's nonsense have to do with you?"

"Miss Crediton," said Fred, seriously, "don't you know me well enough to be frank with me at least? I might pretend to think I had nothing to do with it, but I should not deceive you. Mr Crediton is concerned for his guest and not for his daughter; but, I repeat, so far as I am concerned, you are not to be curbed in your freedom. I prefer rather to be tortured than to be sent away."

"Tortured!" Kate echoed, under her breath, growing pale and growing red. It was wrong

to permit such things to be said to her, and she had already reproved him for it. But still there was something which half pleased her in words which meant so much more than they said. She had a little struggle with herself before she could make up her mind to resist temptation, and withdraw from this dangerous amusement; and when at length she did so, and plunged into conversation with the nearest old lady, Kate felt that nothing less than the highest virtue could have moved her to such a sacrifice. It was a great deal more amusing to sit and listen to Fred Huntley's talk, and watch him gliding along the edge of the precipice, just clearing it by a hair's-breadth, filling the air with captivating suggestions of devotion. Could it be possible that he was so fond of her—a man of the world like Fred? Kate was one of those women who feel a kindness for the men who love them. It may be love out of place—presumptuous, uncalled-for, even treacherous; but still, poor fellow, how sad that he should be so fond of me! the woman says to herself, and is softly moved towards him with a kind of

almost affectionate pity. This was heightened, in the present case, by the fact that Fred Huntley was not at all a man likely to yield to such influences ; and then he too was making a struggle against temptation in which surely he deserved a little sympathy. If at any time he should be overcome by it, and speak out, then of course she would be compelled to give him a distinct answer and send him away. It would be a pity, Kate thought, with a sigh ; but in the mean time he was very interesting, and she was sorry he should be so fond of her, poor fellow ! Thus it will be seen that she had not consciously faltered in her allegiance. She meant to say No to Fred, firmly and clearly, if ever he should speak to her in unmistakable words ; but in the mean time she was interested in him, and very curious to know what next he would say.

It was thus without any sense of wrongdoing that Kate found herself walking along the footpath with Fred Huntley by her side on the October noon when John saw them. She was quite innocent of any evil intention. He had disappeared with the rest of the gentlemen

in the morning, and Kate had not asked either herself or any one else what had become of him; and she had undertaken to walk down to the row of cottages outside the park gates as a matter of kindness to the housekeeper, who was busy. "I will go," she had said quite simply, when Mrs Horner apologised for not having seen and given work to a poor needle-woman there. "Oh, Miss Kate, that will be so good of you—and it is just a nice walk," the housekeeper had said; so that nothing could be more virtuous than the expedition altogether. Kate had not even meant to go alone; her companion, one of the young ladies of the party, had failed her at the last moment by reason of a headache, or some other young-lady-like ailment, and how could Kate tell that she should meet Fred Huntley coming out of the wood just as the trees screened her from the windows of the house? But she was not sorry she had met him. Walking along by herself in the silence, she had grown a little sad and confused in her mind about John and circumstances generally. She had not much time to think, with all the duties of mistress

of the house on her head. But when she was alone she could not elude the questions—What did John mean by his silence?—was he unhappy, poor fellow? Was it her fault or his fault? Would the time ever come when Mr Crediton would consent, and everything would be arranged? Should she be able to make him happy if they were married? All these questions were passing through Kate's mind. "He takes everything so seriously," she said to herself; "he thinks one means it, and one so seldom means it." This she said with a little plaint within her own bosom. And, if it must be confessed, a momentary comparison passed through her mind. Fred Huntley would be so very, very much easier to get on with; he would demand nothing more than she could give, whereas there was no limit to John's demands. The comparison was involuntary, and she was ashamed of herself for making it, but still it had been made; and the next moment Fred Huntley himself had appeared to her stepping over the stile out of the wood.

But the grave look that was on her face, and the silence so unusual to her, which John had

seen and taken for symptoms of other feelings, were in reality caused by the gravity of her thoughts about himself more than by any other cause. She had been almost glad to have her solitude interrupted in order to escape from her thoughts, but they were still in possession of her mind; and when John had heard their voices in the distance, the two were but beginning to talk. Their conversation was quite unobjectionable: he might have heard every word, as she said afterwards. It was kind of Fred Huntley, seeing her so serious, to try to take her mind off her own troubles. He did not launch forth into foolish talk, such as that which he permitted himself sometimes to indulge in, when their *tête-à-tête* went on under the eyes of a roomful of people. He began to tell her about his own prospects and intentions; how he had made up his mind to offer himself as a candidate to represent Camelford at the next election. He had been asked to do so, and he had given a great deal of thought to the subject. "It binds one, and takes away one's personal liberty," he had said; "but, after all, one never has any personal liberty—

and something certain to do, that one can take an interest in, is always, I suppose," he added, with a sigh, "next best."

"Next best to what?" cried Kate, but fortunately for herself left him no time to answer. "I never pretended to be strong-minded," she ran on; "but to help to govern one's own country must be the finest thing in the world. Oh, please, don't smile like that. You think so, or you would not make up your mind to take so much trouble for nothing at all."

"Much the member for Camelford will have to do in the governing of the country!" said Fred; "but still it is true enough: and I suppose when a man is bored to death on a committee, he has as fine a sense that if he die it is in the service of his country, as if he were burrowing in the trenches somewhere. Yes, I suppose when there is nothing pleasanter in hand it is the right sort of thing to do."

"I don't know what pleasanter sort of thing you could have in hand," said Kate.

"No, perhaps not; but I do. I can fancy quite a different sort of life—something out of my reach as far as that branch is," said Fred,



carelessly catching at a high bough which seemed to hang miles over his head against the smiling blue. "Hollo! it is not so far out of reach neither," he added with a quick glance at her, and speaking half under his breath.

"I wish it had been out of your reach," said Kate; "just look what you have done! sprinkled me all over and spoiled my ribbon; and the dew is so cold," she said, with a little shiver. "Mr Huntley, I think I should prefer Parliament if I were you."

"It will be the wisest way," said Fred, momentarily roused out of his good temper; and then he expressed a hundred regrets, and made his moan over the blue ribbon, which, however, it was decided, would be dried by the breeze long before they reached the cottage, and was not spoiled after all.

"What a pity there is a penny post!" said Kate; "how we should have teased your life out to give us franks, as people used to do for their letters. An M.P. was worth something in those days; but when there is anything going on, of course you can get us tickets and good places everywhere. The first

time you make a speech, I shall go to the ladies' gallery. I wonder what it will be about!"

"And so do I," said Fred; "but I fear it will be inaudible in the ladies' gallery. When you are all enjoying yourselves at home after the fatigues of the season, will you compassionate an unhappy man in town in August for the sake of his country? Do you think it is worth such a sacrifice?"

"What a different life it will be!" said Kate, with a half-sigh. "It is all very well to laugh, but how odd it is to think what different lives people have—some in the world and some out of it! I should like to go into Parliament, and be a great potentate too. I daresay it sounds very ridiculous, but I should. I am not so clever as you are, and I have no education; but I hope I understand things better than old Mr Vivian, or Sir Robert, papa's great friend. And yet I shall never have anything better to do than giving things out of a store-room, and spending as little money as possible. How very funny it is!"

"Do you give the things out of the store-room, and keep accounts of the tea and sugar? I acknowledge that must be very funny," said Fred.

"Of course I don't do it *now*. There is Mrs Horner to take all the trouble; but, you know—hereafter——" When she had said this, Kate stopped with a sudden blush; of course he knew that John Mitford's wife would have no housekeeper, and would be obliged to spend as little money as possible. But somehow the contrast galled her, and she stopped short with momentary ill-humour. Why should fate be so different? Why should one be so well off and another so poor? Kate felt it as much for the moment as if she had been a poor needlewoman, making gorgeous garments for a fine lady. It gave her a little angry sense of inferiority; could it be that she might look up to Fred Huntley and consider his acquaintance as an honour in the days to come? She was angry with him for his hopes and his ambition, notwithstanding that he had said it would but be *next best*.

"Hereafter——" said Fred, "how little any

of us know about it! but if there is one creature in the world who can choose her own future, and make it what she pleases, it must be you," he continued, in a low hurried tone. Kate walked on silent as if she had not heard him. They had reached the lodge gates, and were close to the cottage where she was going. She made no reply, took no notice, but she had heard him all the same. She went into the cottage without any suggestion that he should accompany her, and Fred wisely disappeared, leaving her to walk home by herself. This was one great difference between him and John. John would not have left her, would not have dreamed of sacrificing the delight of her society for any piece of policy. But Fred was clear-sighted, and felt that for his ultimate success this was the best. She was half disappointed, half satisfied to find that he was not waiting for her. She had so many things to think of, and there were so many things she did not want to think of. All the delights of the election time which was coming on dazzled Kate. She had only to say a word and she would be the queen of

the occasion, in the heart of all the delightful bustle and excitement and hope and fear. She could not go into Parliament in her own person and help to govern her country, but the next to that would be doing it in the person of her husband. And where was there any likelihood that John would ever give her such a gratification? What he would give her would be the soberest domestic life, weighing out of tea and sugar from the store-room, and much trouble over the necessary economies. "Provided that we are so well off as to have a store-room!" she said to herself. But Fred Huntley's wife would have no such necessity. She would have plenty to spend and something to spare. She was not thinking of herself as Mrs Fred Huntley; she was rather contrasting that fortunate woman with Mrs John Mitford, who would not be nearly so well off. It would be so droll, Kate thought, to see that lady in the prettiest costumes possible, coming to call upon herself, who probably for economy would find it best always to wear a black silk gown. And then it would be so much easier for the other to get

on. Her husband would be so manageable in comparison. He would be good-tempered and polite, and would never dream of taking offence ; whereas John's wife would have to watch his eye, and demean herself accordingly. Kate had given more than one sigh before she got home, of half envy. Life would be so much more easy for Mrs Fred. She would have it in her power to skim lightly over the top of the waves as Kate loved to do, instead of sounding all kinds of depths. She sighed, not because she was faithless to John or had ceased to love him, but only at the thought of how much easier a life that other woman would have ; and an easy life was pleasant to Kate.

I don't know if it was this conversation which made Fred Huntley so over-bold ; but in the evening he spoke as he had never yet ventured to speak. It was the evening which John spent in his dismal little parlour, weary, and wrapt in the stillness of despair, writing his letters before he went home. At Fernwood the young people had got up an impromptu dance. There were a few people to

dinner from some of the neighbouring houses, and this infusion of novelty stimulated the home party. And the wind had changed, and all the frost in the air had disappeared, or at least so the foolish boys and girls, heated with dancing, chose to believe; and they had opened the door of the conservatory, and even strayed out into the moonlight between the dances, without paying the least attention to any warning. However strong the reasons had been which led Kate to decline all private conversation with Fred Huntley, she could not possibly refuse to dance with him, nor could she refuse to take a turn with him through the conservatory, as all the others were doing. And it was there, in the semi-dark, with the moonlight shining in through the dark plants and unseen flowers, that he spoke out, no longer making use of any parable. He told her in so many words that he was a more fit mate for her than John. He argued the question with her, point by point, for Kate was not wise enough to take refuge in a distinct, unexplained No, but went on the foolish idea that he was her friend, and

John's friend, and that she ought to convince him that he was wrong. "Oh don't!" she said, "please, don't. We have always been such friends. Why should you break it all off and make me a kind of an enemy now at the last? You never used to care for me in that way. Oh, please, let us forget it was ever said."

"But I cannot forget it, though you may, Kate," he said, in a voice which was so full of feeling that Kate's curiosity was vividly awakened: (I never thought he would have felt anything so much, she said to herself, flattered and wondering; and rather anxious to know how far this unlooked-for sentiment would carry him). "Kate, we can't go on just being friends. If you knew what I have suffered to see you belonging to another man! I have not a word to say against him. No, I hate him for your sake; but there is not a word to be said against him. The only thing I wonder is, how a fellow so honourable and high-minded should have asked you when he knew he had nothing to offer you. It would have been more like John Mitford to have broken his heart and held his peace."



A strange little cry came from Kate's lips. "Oh!" she said, with a startled look in his face, "how strange that you should be trying to undermine him, and yet know him so well as that!"

"I am not trying to undermine him; I believe in my heart that I would rather the one of us had you who could make you the happiest. It sounds strange, but it is true. If I grant that he loves you as well as I do, would not that be allowing a great deal? but, Kate, think what a change it would be for you; and he would not know so well as I should how to make you happy," Fred added, bending over her, and pressing close to him the hand which still rested on his arm. It was wrong of Kate not to have withdrawn her hand from his arm. She tried to do it now, but it was held fast, and a piteous prayer made to her not to go from him as if she were angry. "You don't dislike me for your friend," Fred pleaded, "and why should you be angry because I cannot help loving you beyond friendship?—is it my fault?"

"Oh, please, don't talk like this," cried Kate,

in her distress. "I am not angry. I don't want to be unkind. I want you to be my friend still. This is only a passing fancy. It will go away, and we shall be just as we were. But it is wrong, when you know I am engaged to him, to try to turn me against John."

"It would be if you were married to him," said Fred; "but, Kate, because I love you, must I be blind to what is best for you? He is not like you, neither am I like you; we are neither of us worthy to kiss the hem of your dress——"

"Nonsense!" cried Kate, vigorously, almost freeing herself; for this was so much out of Fred's way, that it moved her in the midst of so grave a situation almost to the point of laughter.

"It is not nonsense; I know what you think. You think it is the sort of thing that lovers say, and that I don't mean it; but I do mean it. We are neither of us good enough; but I understand you best, Kate—yes, don't deny it. I know you best, and your ways. I should not tease you. I should not ask too much. And with me you would have the life

you are used to. With him you don't know what kind of life you may have, and neither does he. Kate, there are women who could bear that sort of thing, but not you."

"Mr Huntley, I cannot discuss it with you," said Kate, half in despair; "pray, pray, let me go!"

"You are angry," he said—"angry with me who have known you all your life, because you have found out I love you too well."

"I am not angry," she cried; "but oh, please, let me go. You know I ought not to stand here and listen to you. Should you like it if you were him? Oh, let me go!"

"Kate," he cried in her ear, "don't hate me for what I am going to say; if I were him, and knew you had listened to another, I should feel how it was, and accept my fate."

Kate's hot spirit blazed up, and the tears sprang to her eyes. She drew her hand away almost violently. "That is well," she cried—"that is well! that you should be the one to blame me for listening; but I shall do it no more."

"It is because you are driving me half mad," he said.

And what was Kate to do? It was such a strange sensation to see Fred Huntley, a man of the world, standing there pleading before her, driven half mad. Was it possible? If it had been any other man indeed. But Fred! And his voice was full of emotion, his hands trembled, he pleaded with an earnestness that filled her with mingled pity and curiosity and amaze. "Oh, hush, and don't think any more of it," she said. "If you will forget it, I shall. Am I one to make people unhappy? Give me your arm back to the drawing-room, and let us say no more about it. I must not stay longer with you here."

"I will take you back to the drawing-room," he said, "and if you say I am to give up hope, I will do it; but, Kate, don't fix my fate till you know a little better. I am so willing, so very willing, to wait. All I want is that you should know I am here utterly at your command—and you won't wring my heart talking of *him*? Yes, do—wring my heart as you please, but don't send me away. I am

willing to wait for my answer as long as you have the heart to keep me—only don't send me away."

"Oh! how can you speak of an answer?" cried Kate, under her breath. They were on the threshold of the lighted drawing-room by this time, and perhaps he did not hear that faint protestation. He took her to her seat, not with the covert care which he had been lavishing upon her for so long, but with all the signs of the tenderest devotion. She herself, being excited and distracted by what had just passed, was not aware of the difference; but everybody else was. And they had been a long time together in the conservatory, quite too long for an interview between an engaged young lady and a man who was not her betrothed. And there was a flush upon Kate's cheeks, and Fred was eager and excited, and kept near her, without any pretence of making himself generally agreeable. And she looked half afraid of him, and would not dance any more—two signs which were very striking. "Depend upon it, something is going on in that quarter," one of the elder ladies said to

the other. "Little jilt!" said the second ; and if Lady Winton had been there, who felt herself entitled to speak, Kate would no doubt have heard a great deal more about it before she escaped to her own room to try and realise what it was.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

It would be vain to attempt to give any panorama of Kate's thoughts when she had finally taken refuge in her room, and shut out even her maid. The first fire of the season was chirruping in the grate, and there were a good many candles about, for Kate was fond of a great deal of light. She threw herself into her favourite easy-chair by the fire, and clasped her hands across her forehead, and tried very hard to think. There are many girls, no doubt, who would have felt that Fred Huntley had insulted them by such a declaration, with his full knowledge of all the previous circumstances. But Kate could not cut the knot in that summary manner. He was not insulting her. Before he had said a word, had not she herself taken that alterna-

tive into consideration? It was but this very day that she had made that half-envying comparison between herself and the problematical Mrs Fred Huntley; and people do not make such comparisons without some faint notion that a choice might be possible. Besides, Kate was not the kind of girl to be insensible to the reason of the matter. It was perfectly true what Fred Huntley had said. In every way in which the question could be looked at, he was more suitable to her than John. And he would be a great deal easier to get on with. He would not ask so much; he would be quite content with what she could give: whereas the question was, would John ever be content? And Fred would satisfy Mr Crediton, and make everything easy; and nobody knew better than Kate how unlikely it was that John could ever satisfy her father, or that their marriage should take place by anything less than a miracle. The reader will think that she was thus giving up the whole question, but this was not the fact. She was as far from giving John up as she had been a month before, when she went to see him in



Camelford; but she had a candid mind, and could not help considering the question on its merits.

And then it would be impossible to deny that she had a kindness for Fred. He had been very "nice" all this autumn—very attentive and assiduous, and anxious to smooth her path for her. To be sure he had not been quite disinterested; but then, when is a man disinterested? One does not expect it of them, Kate reflected; in short, perhaps one prefers, on the whole, that they should look for a reward, to be given or withheld as the idol wills. This sense of power was very strong in Kate's mind. She liked to think that her hand could dispense life and death; and though the alternative was very thrilling, and made her heart beat loudly, and the blood rush to her face, yet it was not exactly a painful feeling. And then she was very sweet-tempered and sympathetic: it was hard for her to make up her mind to disappoint and grieve any one. She would be sincerely sorry for the man she was obliged to refuse; and if she could have managed it so that Madeline

Winton, or any other nice girl with whom she was intimate, should have suited the taste of that man, it would have been a great relief to her. This thought flashed across her mind more than once in her disquietude; a fact which sufficiently shows how different were the feelings with which she regarded the two candidates for her favour. Such a transfer of affection would have been out of the question with John; but it would not be out of the question with Fred.

Then Kate took to thinking of his earnestness, of the look almost of passion in his face. Fred Huntley to look at any woman like that—to say that he was being driven mad—to plead with such humility! No doubt it was a very astounding thought, almost more extraordinary than any amount of devotion from John, who was a passionate being by nature. And then it would be so easy to get on with Fred! he would understand without difficulty those tastes and habits to which John could never do more than assent with a sigh. What a dilemma it was for a girl to be placed in! Kate had clasped her hands over her eyes that

she might think the better, and let her fire go out, and was stopped in her cogitations by the chill which stole over her. When she roused herself up the hearth was quite black, and seemed to be giving forth cold instead of warmth—and the candles were all burning silently, with now and then a little twinkling of the small steady flames, as if they were sharers in her secret, and knew more about it than she did. She crept to bed very cold and disturbed and uncomfortable, saying to herself now, Poor John! and now, Poor Fred! with painful impartiality. I think, for my own part, that it said wonders for her real faithfulness that she was thus impartial in her thoughts; for Fred was so much more eligible in every way, so much more suitable, more likely to please everybody, more easy to get on with, that there must have been a wonderful balance of feeling on the other side to keep the scales even. John was a very troublesome, unmanageable lover; he ruffled her by his passion, his fondness, his susceptibilities. She could not marry him except by the sacrifice of many things that were very important to her, and

after going through all the agonies of a long, stormy, much-interrupted engagement; whereas everything was smooth and pleasant on the other side. And yet her heart, if it stood tolerably even between them, had not yet swayed one step further off than the middle from her uncomfortable lover; which, considering all Fred's unmistakable advantages, surely said a great deal for Kate.

She got up in the morning with a headache, and without having come to any decision. The thought of meeting Fred calmly before the eyes of all those people, as if nothing had passed, had a curious kind of excitement in it. It was not her fault; and yet she looked forward to meeting him with a certain flutter of semi-agitation, which was not diminished by the fact that he was more assiduous in his attentions than he had ever ventured to be before, or had any right to be. After breakfast Mr Crediton sent to her to go to him in the library, which was a very alarming summons. She grew pale in the midst of her companions when it was delivered to her. "Kate, I know you are going to be scolded,"

said one of them ; “I declare she is trembling. Fancy Kate being frightened for her papa.” “I am sure she deserves to be scolded,” said an elder young lady, gravely. “Do I ?” cried poor Kate ; and she went away half crying, for it was hard upon her to be blamed. She could not bear it, even when she was indifferent to her censors. It hurt her—she who had always been petted by all the world. She went away as near crying as it is consistent with the dignity of a young lady of nineteen to be ; and if either of the two had crossed her path and proposed instant elopement, I almost think she would have consented. But John was at Fanshawe, separated from her by more than distance ; and Fred’s good angel had not whispered to him to throw himself at that moment in her way.

Mr Crediton received her with a certain solemnity, and with a very grave countenance. He made her sit down opposite to him, and looked her in the face. “Kate,” he said, “I have sent for you to have some very serious talk with you. You have got yourself into a grave dilemma, and I think you want my advice.”

Kate was very much frightened, but she was not a girl to lose her head even at such a crisis. She faced the foe courageously, though her cheek grew pale. "I must always be the better for having your advice, papa," she said; "but I don't know of any dilemma. Everything is exactly as it was."

"I don't see how that can be," said Mr Crediton, quietly. "Kate, Fred Huntley has been with me this morning. He is perfectly honourable and straightforward in his mode of action, but I am not so sure about you. He tells me he has asked you to marry him—and notwithstanding that he has got no definite answer, he thought it right to come to me."

"Answer!" cried Kate; "what answer could I give? He knew I was engaged as well as you do. Is it my fault, papa? Can I keep a man from making a fool of himself? He knew of my engagement as well as you."

"Yes," said Mr Crediton; "and he knew that John Mitford went away hurriedly after a three-days' visit, and that there has been no communication between you for some time. Oh, I am not the culprit. I don't examine

your letters. It appears you told him ; and, as a justification of what he has done, he repeated it to me."

"Then it was very, very nasty of him," said Kate, with tears in her eyes ; "and I will never tell him anything again as long as I live."

"I hope at least you won't talk to him on this subject," said her father, gravely. "I have let you have your own way heretofore, Kate. I have given Mr Mitford the best chance I could of proving what was in him ; and if you like to persevere, I shall not interfere. But if you don't care to persevere, it is a different matter. Huntley seems to think you will not. Wait a little, please, till I have said what I have to say. There cannot be a moment's doubt as to which of the two I should prefer for a son-in-law. Fred Huntley has distinguished himself already, though he is so young. He could surround you with every luxury and give you a good position, and everything that heart can desire. And he suits me. He is thoroughly sensible, and full of good feeling ; but he is not highflown. I should get on a great deal better with him

than I ever could do with Mitford ; and, I believe, so would you."

"Papa!" This exclamation was not surprise, but a deprecating, pleading, remonstrating protestation. She made him no further answer, one way or another ; but only looked in his face with wistful eyes.

"I believe you would," said Mr Crediton, stoutly. "You must have felt already, however you may hesitate to say it, that in certain matters this whole business is a great blunder. I am not saying a word against Mitford. We have the greatest reason to be grateful to him. But, Kate, great mistakes have been made out of gratitude—the very gravest mistakes ; and you may be sure that your engagement is to him a very equivocal advantage. He feels it, though he cannot be the first to speak."

"What does he feel ? how do you know ?" cried Kate ; and there came such a sudden chill over her, that the very blood in her veins seemed frozen — a sensation she had never experienced before in all her life.

"It is quite clear what he feels," said Mr Crediton ; "he feels that you are out of his



sphere. He sees what kind of a life you live here, and he is bewildered. How is he to give you all that, or a shadow of it? It is not difficult to divine what he feels; and the thought makes him half morose, as he was when he was here. He cannot bear to lose you, I believe; and yet he is gradually making up his mind that he must lose you. Poor fellow! I for one am very sorry for him; and unless you open a way to him out of it, I don't see what he is to do."

"Papa," said Kate, with her cheeks flaming, "if he has ever given you any reason to think that he wants to be out of it, you have only to let me know."

"I don't want to be unjust," said Mr Credition, "to him or to any one. He has never spoken to me on the subject. It is not likely he should. No man could come to your father, Kate, and say, 'I have made a mistake.' I should kick him out of the house, probably, however glad I might be to hear it. And John Mitford is not the man to do anything of the kind; but his feelings may be easily divined for all that."

Kate sat silent, with her eyes cast down, and twisted her handkerchief in her fingers. Her cheeks were burning, her eyes hot, her heart beating loud. Perhaps it might be true. While she had been calmly comparing her two lovers, feeling herself elevated in a sweet supremacy over them, and free to make her choice, it was possible that her chain had become bondage to one of them. He had gone away hurriedly, it was true. He had spoken very strangely when he went away, and he had not written to her for two long weeks. So long, indeed, had he kept silence, that she had written to him making a kind of appeal. These facts, no doubt, strengthened every word her father said, and gave to them a certain appearance of reality. Her cheeks burned, and seemed to scorch all the moisture out of her eyes; and yet she felt that only the strongest effort kept her from bursting into tears. It was a kind of relief to her when the door opened, and a man came in with Mr Crediton's letters. At least they prevented the necessity of any answer. She sat absorbed in her own thoughts, examining closely, as if

it were a matter of the last importance, the embroidered cipher on her handkerchief, while her father was thus occupied. Kate took no notice how many letters he read—they were nothing to her; nor did she observe the keen glance upward which he gave at her when he had read the first he opened. She did not even remark that the crackling of the paper ceased, and there was an interval of complete stillness. When he spoke to her she started, and came back as if from a long distance. “Yes, papa,” she said, mechanically, without lifting her eyes.

“I did not think it would have come so soon,” said Mr Crediton; “and it is very strange that it should have come at this moment. He has decided the question for himself, Kate, as, one time or other, I thought he would. Look here.”

It was John’s letter he pushed across the table to her, with a feeling that it had arrived at the very moment it was wanted, at the handiest moment. And Mr Crediton was glad; but at the same time he was struck with a little compunction when he saw how eagerly

Kate clutched at it, and how the colour went and came on her face. She read it without a pause, flashing her eye over its contents in a way very different from Mr Crediton's deliberate reading. She had grown breathless in her eagerness. She threw it down on the table, yet did not leave her hold of it, and stretched across to look at the little heap of letters which remained before him. "There must be one for me," she cried; "of course he must have explained all this in his letter to me." When she saw that there was none for her, she rose hurriedly and rang the bell, her father all the while looking on with an amazement which he could not express in words. Was this Kate, this hasty excited creature, full of anxiety and suspense? "Go and see if there are any letters for me," she said, imperiously, to the servant who answered the bell. She would not believe it; she stood angry and feverish, leaning against the mantelpiece with John's letter in her hand. "The letters have been taken up-stairs, ma'am, but there are none for you," said the man, re-entering with a tray in his hand on which were several bundles of

papers carefully separated. She rushed across the room to look at them. There were half-a-dozen at least for Fred Huntley, and some for the other members of the party who were out shooting, but nothing for Miss Crediton. Kate dismissed the servant with a little wave of her hand and walked back to the fire, and stooped down over it to warm herself. She was utterly dismayed, and the ground seemed suddenly cut away from under her very feet. Her heart beat so that she could not speak a word. Was it true, then, all this that had been said to her? Her father turned his chair towards her, and the sight of his child thus stupefied with sudden pain, and half incredulous of the shock she had just received, went to his heart. But yet in his heart he believed it was best for him to drive the stroke home, and not to soothe her by suggestions that the explanation might yet come, such as occurred to him in the first softening of his thoughts.

“My darling!” he said, “of course you feel it. I feel it so much for you, Kate, that I could almost grieve, though I know it to be for the best. Make up your mind at once to

think no more of him. It will be better for you both. It is a shock, but you must have been prepared for the shock. You have trifled with Fred Huntley's feelings for a long time, as you ought not to have done had you not been more or less prepared for this. And, Kate, there is no reason why you should not reward him now."

"Reward him! when it is he who has done it," said Kate, under her breath.

"That is not the case; you must be aware that is not the case. I have watched you all too closely to believe in that. You have done it yourself, Kate; and, if you would believe me, this is the very best thing that could have happened. The slight must hurt, of course, at first——"

"Slight! papa, do you know what you are saying? It is worse than a slight. Oh, how shall I bear it?" said Kate, crushing up John's letter in her clenched hands.

"So I think, my dear," said Mr Crediton, quietly. "I could not have supposed Mitford capable of anything of the kind. But it is best that he should have done it in this de-

cisive way—better than hanging you up for months, or years, if he had his way. And the very best answer I can make is to tell him that—that you have listened to Fred. My dear, don't turn away so impatiently. You have used him very badly if you mean anything else. He is very fond of you, poor fellow! And, Kate, I can't tell how deeply, how much, it would gratify your father," he added, putting his arm round her, and drawing her close to him. Kate had gone through all the stages of passion—she had been agitated, disturbed, startled, driven into amazement and indignation and rage. She was trembling all over with excitement; and now, in the course of nature, it was time for tears to come to relieve her hot eyes. She felt herself drawn into her father's arms, and then the storm broke forth. She could never lose her father, whoever she might lose. She leant her head upon him, and covered her face with her hands, and sobbed upon his breast. "Papa, let me stay with you: I care for nothing but you," she cried, with a broken voice like a child's; and he heard her heart

beating in the pain of this first grand emergency, like some violent imprisoned thing labouring to escape out of its cage.

“My poor child!” he said, holding her close. He was glad of it, and yet it hurt him too because it hurt his daughter. At that moment he could almost have called John back, pleased as he was to have him gone. He held her close, patting her softly with his hand, saying nothing till the outburst was over; and then, when he felt her stir in his arms and lean less heavily against him, he bent down and kissed her and spoke.

“My own Kate,” he said, “take your father’s advice for once. Let it be you to make the change, and not him. Let me call poor Huntley and make him happy. You like him, though you may not think it: you have chosen his society more than that of any one here. Do you think I have not watched you? and I know. My dear, your delicacy is wounded, your feelings have had a great shock; but you will soon learn it is for the best, and Fred will make you happier than



you ever could have been. Let me call the poor fellow now."

"No, no, not now," cried Kate, with her face hidden—"not now. Papa, it is with you I want to stay."

"With me and with Fred," said Mr Crediton. "He will be a son to me, Kate. He will not take you away from me. It is what I have wished for years. You will make us both very happy, my darling," her father went on pleading. "Let me call him now."

"Oh, papa, let me go! He is out," said Kate, in a kind of despair, raising herself from his arms. She wanted to get away to be by herself, to think what it all meant, and scarcely knew or understood what she said.

"He cannot be far off. Let me go and find him," said Mr Crediton; "you would make me so happy, Kate."

"Oh, papa, don't kill me!—not now. I would do anything to make you happy; but not now—I cannot bear any more."

"Then, my darling, I will not press you; but later—when you have had time to think—say at five o'clock; come to me at five

o'clock. You have made him very wretched and treated him very badly, and me too ; but you will make it up to us, my own Kate ? ”

“ Please let me go,” she said, wearily, drawing herself out of his arms, and making visible a face which was no longer flushed and beautiful, but very pale, scared, marked with tears, and reluctant to face the light.

“ You shall go,” said her father, tenderly, leading her to the door. “ But remember at five o'clock—promise that you will come at five o'clock.”

“ Whenever you please—what does it matter ? ” sighed poor Kate. He repeated the hour again in his anxiety, but she paid no attention. She ran up-stairs as soon as she had escaped from him, a little palefaced woe-begone ghost. Some one met her on the stairs, but she did not stop to see who it was. She did not even care to have her emotion perceived, as she would have done under other circumstances. She did not care for anything but getting to a shelter and hiding herself, and asking somebody (was it herself or some hidden

counsellor she should find there ?) what did it all mean ?

Kate had never been very unhappy before all her life, and she did not know how to be very unhappy. She pulled all the blinds down impatiently, thinking it was wicked that the day should be so bright, and then threw herself upon her little white bed. It was not that she wanted to lie down, or to be in darkness, but only that the crisis was so strange, and she felt it necessary to conform to it. She had been thinking of John when she rose that morning, but thinking of him in such a different way, measuring him with Fred Huntley, then asking herself if it would be most for her own good to keep him or to put him aside. And lo ! in a moment, here were the tables turned. He had not even the grace to deliberate or give her warning what he was going to do, but did it on the moment. She could not even upbraid him, for he had gone without saying where he was. He had plucked himself out of her fingers while she had been weighing him, balancing him. Was it not a just punishment ? But he did not know that,

and she had done nothing, so far as he was aware, that could give him any warrant to treat her so summarily. She lay there and shut her eyes, and rocked herself, and moaned a little. And then she opened them very wide, lay still, and gazed at the drawn blinds with her heart fluttering loudly, scarcely able to keep still with mortification and suppressed rage. Yes, he might give her up ; but if he had word sent to him that she was engaged to Fred Huntley, he would feel it—oh, he would feel it ! trust him for that. And Kate repeated to herself with feverish eagerness, “ At five o’clock.” She longed for the hour to come that she might give him this return-blow ; and then she turned and rocked herself and moaned again, feeling such a dreadful pain—a pain she could not account for in her perverse little heart.

When the bell rang for luncheon Parsons came into the room, bouncing, as Kate thought, with her ribbons and her black silk apron, humming a song to herself. “ Goodness gracious me ! ” she cried, suddenly restraining her sprightly steps when she became conscious

of her mistress's presence. "I did not know as you were here, Miss," said Parsons; "I beg your pardon, I am sure. Is it a headache, Miss?"

"Oh, go away and don't bother me; don't you see I am not fit to talk to any one?" cried Kate.

"If it's a bad headache, Miss, there is nothing like lying down, and to bathe the head with a little eau-de-Cologne and water. It's what I always do when I have the headache," said Parsons, bustling and pouring out into a basin the pungent fragrant water. Kate allowed herself to be ministered to without any visible impatience. She did not feel so abandoned by the world when even her maid was by her. And the eau-de-Cologne, she thought, did her a little good.

"That is the bell for lunch, Miss," said Parsons; "and master will be in such a way! Shall I go and tell him you have the headache very bad—or what shall I say?"

"Never mind him," said Kate, faintly; "what does it matter about them and their lunch? Oh, Parsons, I am so very miserable!"

sobbed the poor girl. No, she did not mean to betray herself; but still a little sympathy, though not enough to touch the very skirts of her grievance, she must have.

"Are you indeed, Miss?" said Parsons. "I am sure I'm very, very sorry; but if it's only the headache it can't last. There, I'll put a wet handkerchief on your poor head; perhaps that will do it good."

"It is too deep for anything to do me good," said Kate; but she suffered the handkerchief to be placed on her forehead, and put up with all those mysterious manipulations of the pillow and the hair and the patient which are orthodox in the circumstances. She lay with her eyes closed and the wet kerchief on her forehead, and her hair spread over the pillow, making her face look all the paler in comparison; her pretty mouth drawn down at the corners, her pale lips and closed eyelids, a very image of youthful misery. Her heart was broken, she thought; and oh, how her head ached!

"Did you get your letters, Miss?" said Parsons softly, drawing out her bright hair, and

bending over her sympathetically. But Parsons recoiled in another moment, giving the hair a tug in her consternation, as Kate suddenly stood before her, all blazing and glaring like an avenging angel, with one hand grasping her shoulder and the other clenched menacing in her face.

“My letters!—oh, you wicked miserable woman, it is you who have made me so unhappy! My letters! what do you know of them?” cried Kate.

“Lord, Miss!” said Parsons in dismay, backing before her. And then she began to cry. “I thought as you’d rather I brought ’em upstairs. You weren’t in the drawing-room, nor nowhere to be seen. I meant it for the best,” cried Parsons, backing to the wall with such a terror of the clenched hand as was quite out of proportion to the powers of that little weapon of offence.

“Give them to me,” cried Kate; “draw up the blinds—make haste and throw this wet thing away. My letters, my letters!—oh, if you only knew what harm you have done! Give them to me——”

She sat down on the sofa under the window, which, after being veiled so carefully, now poured in upon her all the light of the full sunshiny October day. There was a note from Madeline Winton, a notification about millinery from Camelford, something else equally unimportant, and the letter from John, which she ought to have had three hours ago. She paused as she took it up, and turned to Parsons, who was still fluttering about the room in her alarm: "Go away," said Kate, solemnly; "you can say I have a headache and am lying down; and, please, don't come near me any more to-day."

"Let me come and dress you, Miss, as usual. Oh, goodness gracious me! as if I meant any harm."

"You need not stop to cry," said Kate, severely; "but go away. You wicked woman! I owe all my trouble to you."

And then as soon as she was alone she read John's letter—the letter he had written in his desolate room before he left Camelford. It went to Kate's heart. She read it and she cried, and she kissed the insensible paper, and



her load seemed lifted off her mind. She had been miserable half an hour ago, and now she was happy. It was such an answer to all her questionings as nothing else could have given. She cried, and the colour came back to her cheek and the light to her eyes. "I am not the bank," she said to herself, with a return of her old levity. "It is not me he means to give up; he must never, never give up me." And then she kissed the letter again. She had never done such a thing all her life; but she did it now without stopping to think, and she read over the end of it, "yours, and only yours, whatever may happen," with a gush of warmth and gladness at her heart. "Dear John! poor John! he is so fond of me. Why is he so fond of me?" she said to herself with sweet tears. And then all at once it struck her as with a great chill that there was more than mere fondness in this letter of John's. "If you should ever want me." "This may pass over and be to you as if it had never been." How could that be? Was not he hers and she his as of old?

Just then there came a knock to the door,

and two little notes were handed in to her. Another cold thrill went over her as she saw them. One was from her father, and the other from Fred Huntley. "My dear, I am grieved your head aches," wrote the first, "but I don't wonder. Keep quite quiet till five, and then come down to the library and make two men very happy. My pretty Kate! Your fond father,  
J. C."

The other was shorter still. "I dare not think or speak, or allow myself to be glad till I see you," said the other; "but my fate is in your sweet hands." Such were the communications that were brought to her from the outer world. Kate gazed at them with open mouth and eyes aghast. Then it all came to her mind. She had promised to go to these men and satisfy them, to give Fred Huntley her hand and her promise, and put her seal to it, that her love for John was over for ever. And yet the touch of her mouth was wet upon John's dear letter, and she hated Fred Huntley as she had never hated any one in her whole life. She sat with the daylight pouring in upon her, and those tokens of fate about her,

and despair in her pale and ghastly face. Kate to be ghastly, who had never known what such a word meant! She was getting a wild look like a creature driven to bay. Now and then when she heard the sound of a voice or step in the house—people coming up-stairs or down, somebody passing along the long passage—she gave a shiver, as a hare might shiver at the baying of the hounds. She sat motionless, it seemed to her for hours, in this torpor, and then it was Fred's voice that roused her. He was down below in front of the house, talking to some one, and she could hear him through the open window. "I am going to the stables to look at the new horses," he said, "but I shall be back before five o'clock." Five o'clock! There was a ring in his voice of conscious triumph. He was coming back to take possession of his victim. At that moment, as Kate sat with the trembling of despair upon her, there suddenly rang out upon her ear the sound of the railway bell at the station, which was always considered such a nuisance at Fernwood. The railway itself was a great convenience, only a quarter of a mile

from the lodge gates; but the bell and the whistle and the rumbling of the train were very objectionable. When Kate heard it she roused herself with a low cry. She thrust John's letter into her dress, and tore the others up in little pieces, and then she sat still, with bright awakened eyes for half an hour more. By that time her resolution was formed. She was miserable and impatient of her misery, and every way of escape seemed shut off except this one, and it was something to do which soothed her excitement. It was not with any such thought that she had sent Parsons away. Nothing had been settled in her mind, or even thought of, till Fred Huntley's voice and the railway bell thus succeeded each other. In circumstances so desperate there is nothing like a sudden inspiration. Four o'clock! the big clock sounded from the stables, and a succession of fairy chimes rang from all the rooms of the house. Four! and no more time to think — for there was not another moment to lose.

## CHAPTER XXX.

KATE had never gone anywhere alone before. She was nothing but one big beating heart, beating so that the little body that contained it could scarcely breathe, when she slipped down the back-stairs and out at the side-door. She put on a great waterproof cloak, one of those garments which are next thing to the domino of the drama as a means of disguise, and a black hat, and a great veil tied over her face as fashion permits. A mask could not have been a greater protection. She was, indeed, masked from head to foot, and except by her gait or outline of her figure could not have been recognised. It seemed to her as if the beating of her heart must have been heard through all the house, bringing everybody out to see what such a noise meant; but it

was not so. In her proper person, and with her pretty face open to the light, Kate Crediton was as courageous as any girl could be, and that is saying a great deal ; but masked and cloaked as she was, and running away, she was all over abject terror. She trembled when the railway porter came to tell her about the train ; her voice was scarcely audible when she got her ticket ; she shrank away to the farthest corner, and hid herself for the few horrible moments that she had to wait. And no words can express the sense of guilt and fear and forlorn loneliness with which she contemplated all the varieties of the journey which she had undertaken. To get out of the carriage by herself at Camelford, to steal across the crowded railway station, a little shrinking black figure in the lamplight, to take another ticket, and have herself put into another train, and then to look forward to the long walk in the dark, the country road, the stillness and loneliness and suspicious looks of everybody who should meet her ! Her own opinion was that two or three times over she had nearly died of it ; and, to tell the truth,

she was not far wrong. The weather had grown milder, but she shivered in her excitement; and it was very cloudy and damp, with occasional showers, and little light in the pale sky. How was she to do it? And what reception was she likely to meet with at the end? And her father, what would his feelings be? All these things seized upon Kate, and caught her in their clutches, and hung about her like ghosts as she pursued her lonely journey. Sometimes her natural courage made an effort to assert itself, but the courage of a girl of nineteen is but little able to sustain her under the sense of secrecy and flight and loneliness and the darkest of country roads.

When she had arrived at the conclusion of her journey, the poor child set out half-a-dozen times from the little lighted station which was as an oasis in the desert of darkness, and as many times crept back again to the shelter of the friendly lights. She leant against the paling of the station-master's cottage opposite the window, where there was protection, and cried. Darkness that she

could feel crept and rustled about her ; and silence, which she could feel too, penetrated to her very soul. She did not dare to ask the porter who had looked at her so curiously, to go with her. He might kill her on the road, and leave her lying there all covered by the darkness, to be found out when it was too late. Kate cried over this picture of herself. They would all be sorry then ; they would be grieved that they had driven her desperate ; and there was one that would never, never recover it all his life. Oh that he were only there now with his strong arm to support her—oh John, John, John ! And all this time his heart was aching too, thinking she had forsaken him. Where was he ? Like herself out somewhere in the night full of despairing thoughts. And here was still this dreadful passage to be crossed before she could even hear of him where he was.

At Fanshawe the scene was very different. Mrs Mitford was seated by the lamp, with her basket by her full of things to mend ; but her hands had fallen into her lap, and there were signs of agitation in her face. There was a



fire burning at the other end of the room, which gave it a different aspect, but she had not yet given up her summer-seat, and the window was open as of old. In the shade behind the lamp, some one was walking up and down—up and down, filling the room with a sense of restlessness and restraint. The two were talking in hushed tones as if something had happened. And not long before, Dr Mitford had flung away out of the room in anger which could scarcely find strong enough expression, “You should have thought of all this sooner. What! leave the bank? Quarrel with your good fortune and all your prospects! No, I have no patience. He has behaved like a fool, and ought to be treated as such,” the Doctor had cried. He was ashamed of his son and of sundry little brags of his own, which John’s fine prospects had called from him; and he did not know how to face the Fanshaves and all the rest of the parish, and allow that John had thrown all his advantages away. He had been struggling, as a weak hot-tempered man is apt to struggle, against the inevitable, that whole day: he had been en-

deavouring to drive John back to a sense of his duty, to Camelford and the bank. "If you had taken my advice you never would have gone into it," he cried; "but now that the sacrifice has been made, to draw back! I have no patience with such folly." John had not said a word in self-defence. He said, "I have been a fool; it is quite true, mother," when Mrs Mitford tried to defend him: and the day had been wretched enough to all concerned. What was he going to do with himself now he had come home? Did he think he could be kept in idleness at his time of life? Such were the galling questions that had been put to John all day long. He had made little answer, and his mother believed he was as much in the dark as she was herself. And naturally, though she could not have taunted her boy as her husband did, still the question was to her, as to him, a very serious one. He could not live at home doing nothing. He had thrown away one hope for the future, and now another; and what was he to do?

"A thing may be very imperfect, very unsatisfactory, not much good that one can see;

and yet it may be the best thing in the world."

This was what John said, breaking the stillness after a long interval; and he paused in his walk and stood still in the shaded part of the room, behind his mother's chair.

"I don't know what you mean, my dear," said Mrs Mitford. "How can a thing be unsatisfactory and yet the best thing in the world? And oh, my own boy, what has that to do with you and me?"

"It has a great deal to do with you and me," he said, behind her chair. "I could not answer my father's questions. It was hard enough to listen to them and keep my patience; but, mother, dear, I can't shut my heart to you. I am not going to live upon you in idleness. I am going back to the work you have trained me for all my life."

"John!" said his mother, with a bewildered cry of joy. She held out her arms to him, and he came and knelt down by her, and they held each other close. "Oh my boy, my boy, my son!" she murmured over him, as she had murmured over his cradle. She could find no

other words ; but as for John, his decision was no joy to him. He had nothing to say to add to the importance of the moment. Thus it must be, and there was a sense of repose in his mind now that he had decided. It was not so great a work, perhaps, as she thought ; but still it was the best in the world ; and whether hopefully or sadly, what did it matter ? a man could do his duty in it. There was no more to be said.

“But oh, John,” said Mrs Mitford, raising her head at last with tears of mingled joy and pain in her eyes, “that will make but little difference now, so far as this world is concerned. It will not make your poor papa less angry, as it would have done three months ago. Mr Fanshawe has promised the living to his nephew. It is a family living, you know ; and it was only because they were so fond of us—I mean of your papa—that you were to have it ; and I was so happy always to think you would take up our work. My dear boy ! if you are thinking of Fanshawe, that is all over now.”

“So much the better, mother,” said John ;

“I was not thinking of Fanshawe. I will take a curacy in a town where there is plenty of work to do, and fight the devil if I can. People say there is no devil; but I think I know better. We can fight him still, please God!”

“God bless my boy! God bless my dearest boy!” cried the mother, with a poignant thrill of delight and disappointment. It was the desire of her heart that was being given to her; but yet so strangely transmogrified, so warped out of the fashion in which she had prayed for it, that it was hard to tell whether it was most pain or joy. And it was after this moment of agitation that her hands had fallen into her lap, though she had a great deal of work to do; and that John had resumed his walk with a relieved mind on the dark side of the room. He was relieved, and yet his heart was so heavy that it made his step heavy too. It sounded like the meditative pace of some old man burdened with care, instead of the elastic step of youth.

And then, as silence, unbroken except by that step, came over them again, there fell into the quiet a sudden little sharp sound like

the click of a latch. Mrs Mitford only heard it, and pricked up her ears with the quick alarm of a dweller in the country. "I wonder if the garden-gate is locked," she said, softly ; "it ought to be locked, now the nights are so dark."

John made no answer, he had not even remarked the sound ; but his mother held her breath and listened with some uneasiness. Nothing followed for many minutes. Stillness as perfect as the darkness seemed to settle outside ; but yet what was that ? — a step upon the gravel ? Mrs Mitford gave a nervous start, and then commanded herself. She had so often thought she heard steps on the gravel. "I think the window should be shut—it grows so chilly," she went on ; but she spoke very low, and still John took no notice. His step went on and on like a kind of chorus. Even his mother, although so near him, saw but a shadowy something walking up and down, and did not derive all the comfort she might have done from his presence. She would have risen to close the window herself, but a certain terror prevented her ; and he

took no notice, being absorbed in his own thoughts.

At last Mrs Mitford's nervousness got the better of her. She put out her hand and caught him as he passed behind her chair. "John," she said, in a whisper, "listen. I think I hear some one in the garden. Hark! I am sure that was a step on the path."

"It is only fancy, mother," said John.

"But hush, hark!" she said, holding him fast; and he stood behind her chair, a mere shadow, and they listened, holding their breath. Silence, rustling, creeping, full of secret stirs and movements; and then there was a louder rustle, and a little trembling frightened voice, like a lost child, cried "Mamma!" The voice seemed to come out of the rose-bushes close to the window, plaintive, complaining, feeble, like a voice in a dream—"Mamma!"

"Oh, who is that?" cried Mrs Mitford, all trembling. "Is it a spirit? Who is it that calls me mamma?"

John stood still, spellbound. He could not move, nor believe his ears. And then his

mother rose up, though she could scarcely stand. "Nobody calls me mamma but one," she cried; "only Kate! Oh my good Lord, something has happened to Kate!"

And then, all at once, the darkness stirred, and a little black figure formed itself out of the night, and glided into the window. Was it a ghost? was it she, killed by unkindness, come to pay them a visit on her way to heaven? The mother and son thought so for one dreadful moment. Her face was as pale as death; her dress all black as the night out of which she came. Mrs Mitford gave a wild shriek, of which she was not sensible, and fell back on her son, who held her, and gazed and gasped. But Kate did not think it strange. It was natural his mother should shrink from her, she thought, and she did not see John in the shadow. She was not thinking of John then. She came in with her little soft quiet step, and threw herself down at Mrs Mitford's knee.

"Yes, it is me," she said; "it is Kate. Mamma, save me; oh take me in and save me! I have nobody to come to but you. They want me to be untrue to my John," she



cried, suddenly, with a shrill break in her voice ; “ and he has deserted me. Oh, mamma, whom can I come to but you ? ”

John dropped his mother into her chair. He made one stride round the table, and clutched at the kneeling creature. He took her up in his arms like a child, and turned her wan face to him, holding it in his hand. He was almost rough with her in the anguish of his eagerness. “ It is Kate,” he said, with an unintelligible cry, and kissed her, and burst out weeping with a great sound, which seemed to fill the whole house. “ It is Kate ! ” raining down kisses upon her hair and her upturned face ; and so stood with her little figure lifted in his arms, mad with the wonder and the misery and the joy—till suddenly the pale little face drooped unconscious, and she hung a dead weight on his arm. “ I have killed her now,” he cried out, with a sharp voice of anguish, and stayed his kisses and sobs to look at her lying motionless upon his breast.

“ It is nothing ; she has fainted,” cried Mrs Mitford, who had been slowly coming to herself, and whom this emergency fully roused.

“Lay her down on the sofa; bring me some water; ring the bell. Oh my poor child! how she must have suffered! how pale she is! Don’t touch her, John; let her lie still. Oh Kate, call me mamma again, my darling! Softly, softly; take off her cloak. Water, Lizzie; and keep quiet. Now she will soon come to herself.”

But it was some time before Kate came to herself; and the whole house was roused by the news which Lizzie, between the production of two bottles of water, flashed into the kitchen. Dr Mitford came and looked at her as she lay, pale and motionless as if she were dead, on the sofa. He walked round it, and took off his spectacles, and looked upon the strange scene with a puckered and careful brow. “Have you sent for the doctor? Have you loosed her stays?” he asked his wife. “They say it is often because of tight stays;” and then he shook his head at the sight. Mrs Mitford was kneeling by the side of the sofa, bathing Kate’s forehead. And John stood at the foot, watching with an anxiety which was uncalled for, and out of all proportion to so common an

accident. But how was he to tell, in the great excitement of that wonderful moment, that she was only fainting and not dead?

By-and-by, slowly and feebly, Kate opened her eyes. "Yes," she said, and at the first whisper of her voice they all crowded round with eager ears: "yes; I am not dead, papa, though I think I ought to have been dead! Was it the horse that took fright? Did it happen just now? I thought it was long ago. But here she is putting the water on my forehead, and there are his eyes looking at me—such kind eyes! And she calls him her John. But I feel as if he were my John too. Is this *now*, or is it long ago? Mamma!"

"My darling!" said Mrs Mitford, with her lips on Kate's cheek.

"Are you my mamma? I can't remember. Or was it just to-day it all happened, and he saved me and you took me in? Ah, no! there is Dr Mitford, and Lizzie, and I have only been dreaming or something; for if it was the first day I should not have known who they were. And I can sit up," said Kate, making a feeble effort to raise herself. She got half

up on her elbow, and looked round upon them all with a face like death, and the feeblest of smiles. And then she sank back, and said pettishly, "John need not stand there as if it were that first day. If I were he, and there was somebody lying here who had been very unkind to me, I would come and give her a kiss, and say 'I am not angry, Kate.'"

John was on his knees by the sofa before she had done speaking; and everybody in the room wept except Dr Mitford, who shook his head and went as far as the mantelpiece, where he stood and warmed himself, and could not but mark how foolish most people were: but still even he was too curious to go back to his study and his work, which would have been the most reasonable thing to do.

The doctor came presently, having been summoned in haste, and decided that Kate must be put to bed and kept very quiet. She was lying with her arm round John's neck in the candour of reconciliation, terribly pale, but quite at ease. "May I have my old room?" she said, "and will you stay with me, mamma? I have not brought a thing, not so

much as a pocket-handkerchief." Kate was Kate again, notwithstanding the dreadful ordeal through which she had passed.

When the unlooked-for visitor had been installed again, an invalid, in the room from which she had sallied forth to invade and transmogrify life at Fanshawe, Mrs Mitford was called outside to speak to John. She found him with his hat in his hand, ready to go out. "I must go to Fernwood instantly," he said; "I shall be in time for the last train from Camelford. Her father must know without delay."

"Do you suppose he does not know?" cried Mrs Mitford. Such an idea had not occurred to her dutiful mind. "But, my dear, surely to-morrow will do."

"I don't think I should lose an hour in letting him know she is in safety. Mother, you will not leave her; you will be very, very good to her—for my sake."

"Oh, my dear, and for her own too," said Mrs Mitford, with tears. "Listen, she is calling me. She cannot bear me out of her sight."

Upon which John took his mother in his arms, and kissed her as he had not done for long, and hurried out with tears in his eyes, and a heart as light as a feather. How the whole world had changed! He looked up at the light in her window as he sped along towards the station, and his whole being melted in a flood of tenderness. She was not a lady of romance—not a peerless princess above all soil of human weakness—but one that did wrong and was sorry, and would do wrong again, perhaps, and yet win a hundred tender pardons. Her very sin against him was only another sweetness. But for that she would never have come to him, never have thrown herself thus upon his love. John skimmed along the dark road which Kate had trod so dolefully, scarcely feeling that he touched the ground. He was too happy even to think. It seemed to be only about two minutes till he was in Camelford, the lights flashing past him through the night. He went across the station hastily towards the platform, which was swarming with the crowd that always made a rush for the last train. The

London train, which was the one that passed Fanshawe, left in about a quarter of an hour, and John was aware that it would be impossible for him to get back that night. But midway between the two, among the porters and the luggage, and all the prosaic details of the place, he ran against some one who called him sharply by his name. And then his shoulder was clutched and himself brought to a sudden standstill. It was Mr Crediton in search of Kate.

“Where are you going?” he asked, imperiously. But John had begun to tell his tale without waiting to be questioned. “I am on my way to Fernwood,” he said, “to let you know. Mr Crediton, Kate is with my mother.” And then there was a pause, and the two looked into each other’s faces. They confronted each other in the midst of the most ordinary prose of life, one the victor, the other the vanquished, with supreme triumph on one side and mortification on the other. John could afford to be friendly and humble, being the conqueror, but Mr Crediton in the darkness set his teeth.

“Well,” he said, with a long-drawn breath, “things being as they are, perhaps on the whole that is best.”

“Mr Crediton,” said John, “you cannot expect me to say I am sorry. God knows how happy and proud I am; but yet I can understand how you should be reluctant to give her to me——”

“Reluctant!” cried her father, between his set teeth; and then he stopped short, and made a supreme effort. “What are you going to do?” he said. “Your train is just starting—unless I can offer you a bed for the night.”

“Will not you come to Fanshawe with me?”

“It is useless now. I am glad she is safe—that was all I wanted to know,” said Kate’s father, with a thrill of pain in his voice. He stood still a moment longer, gazing blankly at John without seeing him, and then added, “Of course after this there is nothing more to be said.”

“I think not,” said John, humbly. It is so easy to be humble when one has the victory. He looked wistfully at his adversary, longing



to say something friendly, something comforting. "There is nothing in the world I would not do for her happiness," he added. "I would have given her up; but I thank God that is over now."

"Of course it is over," said Mr Crediton. "If you choose to return to the bank different arrangements shall be made. Of course I have nothing for it but to acquiesce now;" and he turned away his head and stood mute, in an attitude which went to John's heart.

"I am sorry you don't like me," he said, involuntarily; "but when you see her happy—as please God she shall be happy——"

"That will do," said Mr Crediton, waving his hand; "you will lose your train—good-night." He turned and moved a few steps away and then came back again. "If your mother will be so good as to bring up my child to me as soon as she is able—to-morrow if she is able—I shall be much obliged to her; and in the morning, if you like, I shall be glad to see you at the bank."

"I will come," said John; and then he

asked more humbly than ever, "Will you send no message to Kate?"

"Message! what message could I send her? I have been the most indulgent of fathers, and she deceives me. I have kept her as the apple of my eye, and she runs away from me to you. What does she know of you that she should put you before me?" cried the father, with sudden passion: and then he stopped again with that sense of the vanity and uselessness of all passion which comes natural to a man of the world. "Tell her I am glad she has taken no harm, and that I expect her to be at home at Fernwood when I return to-morrow," he added, in his hardest, calmest voice: "good-night."

If there had been anybody there strict to interpret the bye-laws of the railway company, no doubt John Mitford would have suffered for it—for he made a spring into the train when it was fairly off, aided and abetted by a Fanshawe guard, who shouted "Here you are, sir!" in defiance of all by-laws. Mr Crediton went back to his house in Camelford, to the great amazement of the housekeeper,

and sat half through the night thinking it over, trying to make the best of it. There was nothing further to be said. From the moment when Kate's little note was delivered to him by the frightened Parsons before dinner, he had felt that the matter was settled and could not be reopened. "Papa, he has not given me up, and I will not give him up, and my heart is broken, and I am going to Mrs Mitford at Fanshawe," was what Kate said. It had been supposed by Fred Huntley and himself that her failure at five o'clock was the result of her headache, or of a little perversity, and it was not till just before dinner that the note was found on her dressing-table. Mr Crediton sat at the foot of his table and made-believe to eat his dinner, and explained that Kate had a bad headache; and as soon as the ladies had left the table made some excuse of urgent business and hastened to Camelford. He had handed the note to Fred first, who received it after the first shock as became a man of the world. "I will stay and do what I can to amuse the people to-night," he said, "and to-morrow morning I

will go. Thanks for all you would have done for me. Perhaps we pressed her too hard at the last."

"You are a good fellow, Fred," said Mr Crediton; "God bless you! I can never forget how well you have behaved. You can scarcely feel it more than I do," he added, with something rising in his throat. Huntley wrung his hand, but shook his head a little and did not speak. They were in the wrong, and Fred had been almost a traitor; but yet they had their feelings too, and he felt it more than the father did—who had not lost her, and would come round and forgive—more than anybody could have supposed Fred Huntley would feel anything. The people in the drawing-room said to each other how pale he was. "Is it all because Kate has a headache?" they asked each other; but he did his best to replace the missing host, and went off in the morning without saying a word to anybody. "I am not much of a good fellow," he said to himself bitterly, "but still I am not such a cad as to shriek out when I am beaten; and I am beaten, worse luck!" Thus

Fred Huntley disappeared and was seen no more.

Next morning John was allowed to go in under his mother's charge to Kate's room, where she sat up in her bed, still pale, but growing red as a rose at the sight of him, wrapt in Mrs Mitford's dressing-gown. The kind woman had a little doubt whether it was quite right; but as she was present every moment of the time, and heard every word they said, there could not be any great harm done: and it was right that she should know all that her father had said. "Must I go back to-day? am I able?" she said, with supplication in her eyes, looking at Mrs Mitford; but soon was quite diverted from that subject by hearing of John's appointment for that morning to meet her father at the bank.

"I wonder what different arrangements he will make," she said, looking up in her lover's face, and pressing in her little hand the big fingers which held hers. Her face grew solemn gazing up at him. If she could but have gone with him, stood by him, made sure that there would be nothing to vex him. Kate had been

down to the lowest depths last night, and had sought help, and knew herself incapable of giving it; but in the morning Kate was a different woman, and longed to interfere and defend her own, and take into her hands once more the guidance of affairs.

The mother and the son looked at each other, and then Mrs Mitford spoke. "My dear," she said, faltering, "I hope you will not be much disappointed. You can see yourself that the other way did not bring a blessing. Kate, before you came last night, John had made up his mind to be a clergyman after all."

As for John, he took both her hands in his and watched with unspeakable anxiety the expression of her face. But Kate drew her hands away and listened, not looking at him, —not taking in at first, he thought, the meaning of what was said. Then all at once she sat upright and threw her arms round his neck. I am not sure that she ought to have been so demonstrative; but she was. "I am so glad!" she cried—"I am so glad! Oh, you dear old John, that will set everything right!"

“But, Kate,” remonstrated Mrs Mitford, utterly bewildered by this inconsistency, “you used to say——”

“Mamma,” said Kate, solemnly, pushing her lover away from her, “I know I was meant, from the first moment I was born, to be a clergyman’s wife.”

To this solemn protestation what could anybody reply?

And the curious fact was that it turned out quite true. It was her natural business in this world to manage everybody—the parish and the poor, and a whole little kingdom; and it was something utterly new and delightful, and gave full scope for all her powers. Mr Crediton resisted, as was natural, and the Fanshaws held out a little about the nephew to whom they had promised the living; and John had his own difficulties, of which, after all this, he spoke but little: but everything came right in the end. My own belief is that a curacy in a town would have been a great deal better for him to begin with, and that was his own opinion; but nobody else was of the same mind: and even in the country, in the village, there is

scope enough to show, as John said, that though the work may be sadly imperfect, sadly unsuccessful and unsatisfactory, it was still the best that is to be had in this imperfect world.

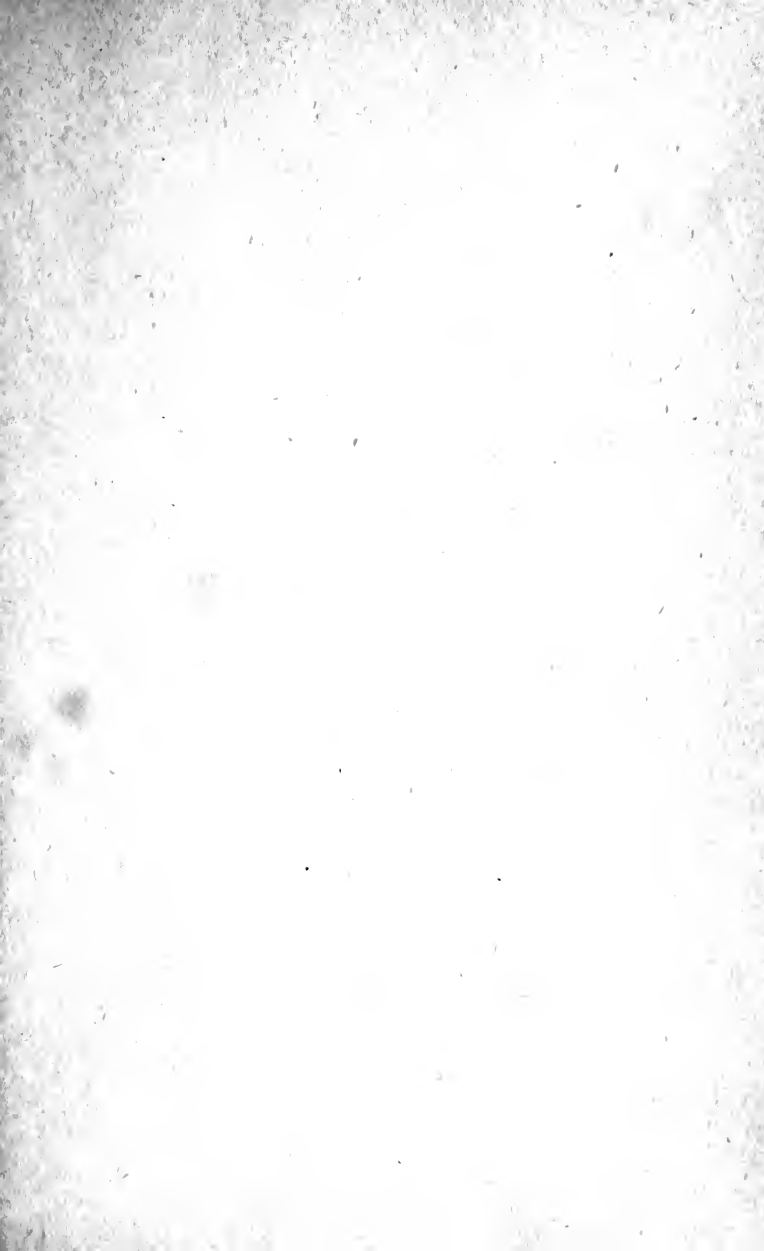
And I hope they will be very happy, now all their troubles (as people say) are over. But it is very hard to make any prediction on such a subject, and one cannot help feeling as Mr Crediton felt, and as Kate herself even was so candid as to allow, that but for that very confusing condition called Love, which puts out so many calculations, Fred Huntley would have been a much more suitable match for her after all.

THE END.













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